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REVELATION

FROM METAPHOR TO ANALOGY

SECOND EDITION

Richard Swinburne

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SECOND EDITION

RICHARD SWINBURNE

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Preface to the Second Edition

Revelation is concerned with how we can recognize a revelation from God, the grounds for recognizing the original revelation of the teaching of Jesus and his apostles as such a revelation, and the grounds for recognizing later Christian teaching as properly derived from that original revelation. The first edition was published in 1992. In this second edition I have sought to give more thorough historical grounding to some of the claims of Part III, and to take account of relevant writings (including my own) published since 1992. But the major change has been the addition of a long chapter in which I discuss Christian claims about God's revelation of detailed moral truths. In considering Christian teaching in the first edition I was concerned only with Christian claims about revelation of the metaphysical and historical matters which are incorporated in the Nicene Creed and other theological definitions (e.g. that Jesus Christ was both divine and human, and rose from the dead). But, like Judaism and Islam, Christianity has also claimed that God has revealed certain truths about the right way to live our personal lives; and in this second edition, in a new Chapter 11, I look also at these claims. I consider the most controversial topics on which Christians have claimed the authority of revelation for their views. These include both topics of current popular interest (and among them, mainly ones concerned with sexual matters, such as divorce and homosexuality) and topics which provoked considerable controversy in the past (such as usury and slavery). The book is subtitled 'From Metaphor to Analogy', to make the point that much doctrinal truth was expressed in highly metaphorical ways in books of the Old Testament, and that while the Christian Church tried to express doctrinal truths as precisely as possible in its definitions, it often had to use words in analogical senses.

Evidence for and against the truth of Christian doctrines comes from several sources. First, since all Christian doctrines assume the existence of a God (of a certain kind), any evidence for and against the existence of a God (of that kind) is importantly relevant. Secondly, we must consider any *a priori* reasons arising from the nature of God for supposing other doctrines to be true of him. Thus there are, I believe, *a priori* reasons for believing God to be a Trinity ('three persons of one substance' in the traditional formula), and *a priori* reasons for believing that there is a

significant probability that he would become incarnate (take on himself a human nature for a period of time). Then, thirdly, there is detailed historical evidence relevant to the historical claims of Christianity, and in particular relevant to the doctrine of the Resurrection. I have provided some a priori justification for the three central metaphysical doctrines of Christianity elsewhere—for a doctrine of the Atonement in *Responsibility and Atonement* (1989), and for the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in *The Christian God* (1994). And in this second edition of the present book I seek to provide some a priori justification of detailed Christian moral claims. I discussed the historical evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus in my book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003). But all Christian doctrines also claim support from the purported fact that they have been revealed (and normally reported in the Church-authenticated Bible), and the major task of this book is to examine the support which they get from that source.

I claim that the Resurrection of Jesus provides God's signature on the teaching of Jesus and the Church which he founded, and so gives us reason for believing what the Church claims to have been revealed. But philosophy and systematic theology are highly integrated subjects—someone's views on one topic inevitably depend crucially on their views on many other topics. And among the a priori reasons for believing in the Resurrection is that God might be expected to reveal to us various truths which we need to know, and to put his signature on the teaching of some prophet to show that that prophet's teaching was indeed revealed teaching by means of a miraculous event such as the Resurrection. So any reason for supposing that the teaching of Jesus or of the Church was false, or that the Church did not derive its teaching from the teaching of Jesus in the proper way, would be evidence against God having put his signature on the teaching of Jesus, and so evidence against the occurrence of the Resurrection. And any evidence for supposing that the teaching of Jesus or the Church is true, and that the latter was properly derived from the former, is evidence in favour of the Resurrection. In *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* I passed very briefly over the issue of the extent to which the later history of the Church provides evidence relevant to the Resurrection of Jesus. So one way of looking at the present book is as a discussion of an issue with which I dealt too quickly in considering the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus. But if you look at it in the way primarily intended—how to assess what are the claims of the Christian Revelation and how to assess their truth—you will find that it passes very quickly

over crucial matters which I have discussed elsewhere; and I summarize at relevant places in this book what I have written elsewhere on these other matters.

The book adduces much historical evidence—both about the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, and about the history of Christian doctrine. Arguments of this kind (and in particular the argument of the first edition of *Revelation*) using historical data as part of a cumulative case for the truth of Christian doctrine have been subject to a general criticism by Alvin Plantinga. He has given an argument from ‘dwindling probabilities’, designed to show that Christian doctrine could obtain in this way only a low probability. In a new Appendix I use the probability calculus to give formal shape to the argument of this book, and to show why I regard Plantinga’s argument as mistaken.

The first edition used material from four previous papers of mine: ‘Analogy and Metaphor’, originally published in G. J. Hughes (ed.), *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology* (Search Press, 1987); ‘Meaning in the Bible’, in T. A. Roberts and S. Sutherland (eds.), *Reason, Religion and the Self* (University of Wales Press, 1989); ‘Interpreting the New Testament’, in T. P. Flint and E. Stump (eds.), *Philosophical Theology and Biblical Exegesis* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); and ‘Revelation’, in K. J. Clark (ed.), *Our Knowledge of God* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992). This edition uses additional material from ‘Natural Theology, its “Dwindling Probabilities” and “Lack of Rapport”’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 21 (2004), 533–46. I thank the editors and publishers of these volumes for their permission to use this material, and Oxford University Press for permission to reuse some passages first published in previous books of mine. I am grateful to Bishop Kallistos Ware for helpful advice relevant to the revised version of Chapter 8 and the new Chapter 11. I remain grateful to Tom Wright and John Barton for helpful comments on earlier versions of Chapters 7 and 10 respectively; and, as ever, to so many philosophers and theologians whose criticisms helped me to develop or rethink my views. And many thanks, finally, to Sarah Barker for typing various versions of this book (as of two previous books). In writing this book more than in writing any other book, I was conscious of my intellectual debt to various former members of the University of Oxford who have argued that the claims of the Christian Revelation stand up well before the tribunal of an impartial reason—to Duns Scotus and John Locke, and especially to two former members of Oriel College, Joseph Butler and John Henry Newman.

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Introduction

The topic of this book is revelation from God, and how we can recognize that it has occurred. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all claim that God has given us a revelation. Divine revelation may be either of God, or by God of propositional truth. Traditionally, Christianity has claimed that the Christian Revelation has involved both of these: God revealed himself in becoming incarnate (i.e. human) as Jesus Christ, and by the teaching of Jesus and the Church which he founded God revealed various propositional truths.¹ My primary concern in this book is with revelation in the secondary sense of revelation of propositional truth. I am not concerned with all knowledge which God makes available to us, but only with that knowledge which he communicates directly only to certain individuals, and which they communicate to the rest of the world, when the adequate grounds for believing in these items of knowledge available to the first recipients are not available to the rest of the world, but the latter have adequate grounds for believing them, in the traditional phrase, ‘upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God in some extraordinary way of communication’.² Knowledge of God and his purposes, obtained by this route, is the concern of revealed theology, as opposed to natural theology (which is knowledge of God and his purposes available from the study of publicly available evidence of the natural world). However, the division between natural and revealed theology cannot be a sharp one. Although a study of the natural world provides, I believe, good reason for believing that there is a God, further reason for that belief would be provided by the fact (if it is a fact) that some prophet gave purportedly revealed teaching of a kind and

¹ The First Vatican Council declared (in *De Fide Catholica* 2) that God revealed ‘himself and ‘the eternal laws of his will’ (ed. N. P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Sheed & Ward, 1990), ii. 806); and the Second Vatican Council said much the same in *De Divina Revelatione* 2 (see Tanner, ii. 972). (Subsequent references to ‘Tanner’ are to the above work.)

² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV. 18. 2.

in a way which is to be expected if there is a God. Conversely, evidence from the natural world that there is a God provides part of the grounds for supposing that the teaching of some prophet is God's revelation.

There are various ways in which one person can communicate a message, a claim that something is so. The obvious way is to use (spoken or written) sentences of normal grammatical forms using words in literal senses. But there are other ways: we may use words analogically and metaphorically, and use myths and models, parables and poems. And words are not the only vehicle by which a message may be communicated. Parables may be acted (e.g. in liturgy), and moral instruction may be conveyed by example. All of these latter ways for conveying a message are more prominent in less scientifically orientated cultures. Not that models and metaphors lack importance in scientific discourse; one cannot do without them anywhere, but they are less prominent there than elsewhere. Cultures very different from our own, such as the cultures in which the great religions arose, may employ a variety of methods to convey a message; and it requires some sensitivity to the culture to recognize the job which words (or other devices) are being used to do: for instance, when they are being used to convey a historical claim, when they are being used to make a philosophical claim, and when they are being used simply to show us how to live. The first part of this book will analyse these different ways of conveying a message. I hope that this discussion will be of general philosophical interest, as well as of interest to those concerned with the topic which is the ultimate focus of the book. Part I is a necessary prolegomenon to this enquiry, because we need to be clear about the criteria for determining what the message of the purported revelation is, before we can set about assessing its credibility. I apologize to those readers, presumably the majority, whose interest in this book is an interest in the credibility of claims of revelation, for the rigour of the philosophical discussions and distinctions of Part I; and I ask them to take on trust the relevance of this for what is to come.

Part II considers the central issue of the tests by which one can recognize some spoken affirmation or written document as revealed truth. I shall consider whether humans have reason for expecting a revelation, and what kind of revelation we might expect a God (if there is a God) to provide. In so far as there is good reason to expect a revelation, we need less historical evidence to show that it has occurred. If a well-established scientific theory leads you to expect that stars will sometimes explode, then some debris in the sky of a kind which could

have been caused by an exploding star, but which (though improbably) just might have some other cause, may nevertheless be reasonably interpreted as debris left by an exploding star. But if a well-established theory says that stars cannot explode, you will need very strong evidence that the debris could not have had another cause before interpreting it as debris of an exploding star. Similarly, how strong we need our historical evidence that a revelation has occurred to be depends on how probable it is on other evidence that there is a God (with a certain nature, including perfect goodness) and how likely it is a priori that such a God (in virtue of his nature) will give us a revelation and that it will have a certain kind of content. Hence the relevance, in judging the genuineness of a purported revelation, of arguments for the existence of God; and the relevance of the degree of a priori probability possessed by the content of that revelation. No elements of that revelation must seem very improbable on other grounds; for example, the moral claims of the purported revelation must not clash violently with our understanding of what is morally good. But since the point of a revelation is to tell us things for which we do not already have adequate evidence, we need further historical evidence that a purported revelation comes from God; and that, I shall argue, must take the form of evidence of a miraculous intervention into the natural order, reasonably interpreted as God's authentication of a purported revelation.

Part III seeks to apply the results of Part II to assessing the content of the purported Christian Revelation, and the strength of the evidence from history (of Jesus and subsequent Christianity) that it is indeed a revelation from God. I begin by considering the content of the original Christian Revelation, and (briefly) the evidence for its miraculous authentication by the Resurrection of Jesus. If a revelation is to be available to later generations and other cultures, it will need a body to interpret it, a church. I go on to analyse the criteria whereby we can recognize the interpreting body, the Christian Church, and I then apply the results of Part I to analysing the content of the written documents (theological definitions, the Bible, and moral teaching) which the church has issued or authenticated; and also the strength of other evidence for the truth of some of these documents.

Religions often claim to have minor as well as major revelations. The former are purported particular messages to individuals about matters of mere immediate concern; the latter are big messages of world-shaking significance for the practice of religion. My concern will be only with the latter. Some modern theologians have denied that Christianity

involves any propositional revelation,³ but there can be little doubt that from the second century (and in my view from the first century) until the eighteenth century Christians and non-Christians were virtually unanimous in supposing that it claimed to have such a revelation, and so it is worthwhile investigating its traditional claim. It is in any case very hard to see how it would be of great use to us for God to reveal himself in history (e.g. in the Exodus, or in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus) unless we could understand the cosmic significance of what happened—for example, that Jesus was God incarnate and that his life and death constituted an atonement for our sins. And how are we to know that unless with the history God provides its interpretation?

³ David Kelsey wrote in 1975 of ‘a wide-spread consensus in Protestant theology in the past four decades that the “revelation” to which scripture attests is a self-manifestation by God in historical events, not information about God stated in divinely communicated doctrines or concepts’ (*The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (SCM Press, 1975), 32). This ‘wide-spread consensus’ was hardly heard of before the nineteenth century. For the major recent writers who championed accounts of revelation which they saw as involving no propositional element, and the difficulties of such accounts, see A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Gill & Macmillan, 1983).

PART I

MEANING

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1

Terminology

Part I is concerned with the different ways of communicating a message that something is so. In this chapter I introduce a precise vocabulary for talking about these matters. Let us call a claim, a message which someone might try to convey to someone else, and which has a permanent truth-value (is eternally either true or false), a statement. A statement says that something is so. If it is so, the statement is true; if it is not so, the statement is false.

A statement is often expressed by a token declarative sentence. By a *token sentence* I mean a sentence uttered on a particular occasion by a particular person in particular circumstances: for example, 'It is raining now', uttered by me in Oxford at 6 p.m. yesterday, 1 March 2006; or 'You look tired', uttered by me at 2 p.m. today, 2 March 2006, to John. (When I write about sentences being 'uttered' or being 'written', this is to be read as 'uttered or written'; and when I write about the 'speaker' or the 'author', this is to be read as 'speaker or author'—unless the context makes it clear otherwise. In general the same results apply to written as to spoken sentences.) Any utterance of the same words is a token of a type; the *type sentence* 'You are tired' may be uttered by different speakers on different occasions. Each such utterance is the utterance of a different token of the same type. By a *declarative sentence* I mean one which expresses a claim that something is so independently of the sentence being uttered, as opposed to asking a question, or issuing a command. Indicative sentences are normally declarative. Different token sentences may say the same thing, make the same claim about the world, convey the same information. Hence philosophers wish to introduce a notion of a statement or proposition or thought as that which a token sentence means or expresses, and which may also be expressed by a different token sentence. But there are different ways of understanding 'say the same thing' which generate different notions of statement, proposition, or whatever. Because the philosophical terminology for what sentences express is not standard, I

make my own distinction between two different ways of understanding what a sentence expresses.

I distinguish in future between statement and proposition as follows. The *proposition* which a token sentence *s* expresses is that element of claim in what is said which is also made by any other token sentence (whether of the same type or not) which is synonymous with *s*. Two sentences express the same proposition if and only if they are synonymous.¹ 'Rex mortuus est', uttered by a Latin speaker of the fourteenth century, 'Le roi est mort', uttered by a French speaker of the eighteenth century, and 'The king is dead', uttered by an English speaker of the twentieth century, express the same proposition. If you take into account only what dictionaries and grammars tell you that the words mean, and forget the context of utterance, the three sentences mean the same. By contrast, the *statement* which a token sentence expresses is the claim made by the token sentence in its particular context about how things are in the world. The three token sentences just cited did not express the same statement, for (we may reasonably suppose) they concern different kings, whereas 'I am ill', spoken by me, 'You are ill', addressed to me, and 'He is ill', spoken of me, all uttered at the same time, do all express the same statement (although not the same proposition). A more precise definition of a statement is that it is that element of claim in what is said which is made by any other token sentence *r* which would be synonymous with *s* if you substitute in both *s* and *r* the same rigid designators (see below) for each individual referred to, distinct from those referring to a different individual. I shall now explain what this definition means.

A *referring expression* is a word or words which pick out an individual thing in order to say something about it. Referring expressions include indexicals, definite descriptions, and proper names. *Indexicals* are devices which pick out different individuals in different contexts; their meaning determines how to use them in different contexts. Thus 'I' is an indexical; it refers to the speaker or writer of the sentence containing it, whoever that is. So too are 'you', 'he', 'this', 'today', 'tomorrow', 'the place over there', and so on. *Definite descriptions* are expressions of the form 'the so-and-so', which pick out the one and only individual which is so-and-so—for example, 'the king of Spain' or 'the oldest living human being'.

¹ I assume, contrary to Quine, that the notion of synonymy is sufficiently clear to be used in such a definition. On this see my 'Analytic/Synthetic', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1984), 31–42; esp. 39–40.

Proper names are names which have no meaning determining which individuals they pick out (i.e. they do not, like definite descriptions, pick out some individual in virtue of his possessing some property), but have conventions associated with them in a given context of use which determine this. 'Aristotle' is a proper name; who it picks out (the philosopher or the shipowner) is determined by the conventions of the context in which it is used. A *rigid designator* is a referring expression which (in virtue of its meaning and the context of its use) picks out the individual (or other thing) it does quite independently of whether that individual gains or loses properties during its existence. Proper names are rigid designators; definite descriptions (normally) are not. 'The president of the USA' picks out George Bush, but only while he continues to be president of the USA. Hence it is not a rigid designator. But 'George Bush' is a rigid designator, because it will pick out the same individual whatever happens to him in life. An individual is any thing. But the most evident kinds of thing to which reference is made are substances, places, and times. By a substance I understand a thing, such as a desk or a planet or a person, which causally interacts with other things.

Substances are contrasted with the (monadic) *properties* they possess, such as being brown or square; and the *relations* (polyadic properties) which they possess to other substances, such as being-to-the-left-of, or caused-to-exist-by. *Predicates* are words designating properties or relations, such as 'brown' or 'to the left of'. A given individual may be picked out by, referred to by, different referring expressions: 'George Bush' and 'the president of the USA' both (in 2006) pick out the same individual. The way by which an individual is picked out is often called its *mode of presentation*.

These definitions should now clarify my account of what a statement is. With normal subject–predicate sentences (i.e. sentences attributing a property to an individual at a certain time) my account boils down to: the statement which a token sentence *s* expresses is that element of claim in what is said which is made by any other token sentence *r* which predicates the same properties of the same individuals, at the same times and places (however the individuals, times, and places are picked out); when properties are the same if and only if the predicates which (rigidly) designate them are synonymous. So two sentences express the same statement if and only if they attribute the same properties to the same individuals at the same time, whatever the mode of presentation by which those individuals, properties, and times are picked out, as the

examples cited above illustrate. To take a different example, 'I will go to London tomorrow' uttered by me on 1 January, 'I am going to London today' uttered by me on 2 January, and 'I went to London yesterday' uttered by me on 3 January (given that 'London' refers to the same city) all express the same statement.

Both token sentences and the propositions and statements which they express may be said to be true or false. Whether a given token sentence is true or false depends on three facets of the world: (1) the conventions of the language in which the sentence is uttered; (2) the referential context—that is, those circumstances of its utterance which determine the reference of its expressions referring to individuals and times (e.g. by whom it is uttered, when, to whom, in the presence of which objects, in which community); and (3) other features of the world, which I shall call the remaining truth-relevant conditions. Whether 'You are ill' is true depends on (1) what the words mean, (2) who is being addressed and when, and (3) whether that person is ill. (1) determines which proposition is uttered, (1) and (2) together determine which statement is uttered, and the other features (i.e. (2) and (3) for a proposition, (3) for a statement) determine whether that proposition or statement is true. The conventions of language determine the meanings of general terms, connectives, and so forth. They lay down how, in the circumstances of utterance, to determine the referent of indexical expressions: for instance, they state that 'you' refers to the person to whom the speaker is speaking. It is then those circumstances (i.e. (2)) which determine what the referent is (e.g. what 'you' is). The conventions of language, however, contain no rules for determining the reference of proper names such as 'George Bush' or 'Tony Blair'; that is not a matter of language, but of community practice (i.e. (2)).

It follows that the truth-value of a statement is invariant: if true, it is true always and everywhere, by whoever and to whomever it is uttered. This will be because its truth depends on the properties possessed by individuals at particular times, independently of how those properties, individuals and times are picked out. By contrast, although the proposition expressed by a token sentence also has a content independent of the who, where, and when of utterance, these latter come in to determine its truth. So the proposition expressed by 'I am cold' may be true today, false tomorrow, true when uttered by me but false when uttered by you—just as it may be funny or irrelevant or contradict what has been said before, today but not tomorrow, when uttered by you but not when uttered by me. Propositions are, as it

were, meaning-involved expressions waiting to be pinned down to who, where, and when, before they have a definite truth-value. Statements are meaning-involved expressions already so pinned down. The truth of statements is absolute, of propositions relative. In my terminology a token sentence expresses both a proposition and a statement.² The truth-conditions of a proposition are those combinations of referential contexts and remaining truth-relevant conditions under which the proposition would be true; the truth-conditions of a statement are those remaining truth-relevant conditions under which it would be true.

In so far as statements affirm the possession of properties by substances at particular places and times, they make no reference to the mode of presentation of those substances, properties, and times. The mode of presentation contained in the sentence in virtue of the linguistic conventions is, as it were, cancelled out by the referential context. We get to the same things via different modes of presentation, which are then dismissed as irrelevant. Yet, since the linguistic conventions alone determine which proposition is expressed by a sentence, propositions retain within them the mode of presentation. Thus, the sentence 'It is now raining' expresses a proposition in which the *nowness* of the rain is an essential element. Yet, if we suppose the sentence was uttered on 1 July 2006, the statement expressed thereby tells us that it is raining on that day (however the day is picked out); the fact that it is raining on the same day as the token sentence expressing the statement was uttered is irrelevant to the claim being made—'now' is just a word which enables us to get at which statement is being expressed. Token sentences are the primary truth-bearers; but there is a point in distinguishing a notion of what is said from the notion of the sentence by means of which it is said. Yet if we do that in terms of statements, we need to bear in mind that the statement ignores certain aspects of what is said; and we need some other understanding of 'what is said', such as the proposition, in order to be able to talk about them.³ My concern with what is expressed by a sentence will in general in Parts II and III be a concern with the statement rather than the proposition expressed; for my concern is with messages which one author may convey to many hearers over many years about how things are independently of the mode

² For the origins and use of this distinction between proposition and statement, and of similar distinctions in recent philosophical writing, see Additional Note A.

³ That we need propositions as well as statements in order to express certain important truths about the world is argued in my 'Tensed Facts', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 27 (1990), 117–30.

of presentation to particular hearers (e.g. independently of the temporal and spatial distances from those hearers of the events being reported). However, despite this technical though important philosophical point, since statements are expressed by sentences via the propositions which the sentences express, I shall follow theological terminology in describing my concern with the revelation which can be expressed by sentences as a concern with 'propositional revelation'. Also, henceforward, in talking about what is expressed by a token sentence or about the meaning of such a sentence, I shall not distinguish between the proposition and the statement expressed except where it is important to do so for the point which I am making; otherwise, either it will be obvious which I intend or my point will apply to both the proposition and the statement.

I earlier defined a token sentence as 'a sentence uttered on a particular occasion by a particular person in particular circumstances'. Each new utterance of the same type sentence is an utterance of a new token sentence; and each new inscription in writing of the same type sentence is an inscription of a new token sentence. I now make one qualification. Where the sentence is embedded in a large repeatable context, such as a sentence of a book of which there may be many copies or of a play of which there may be many performances, I count all tokens of the sentence in that context as the same token as long as the context remains qualitatively identical in all respects which affect the meaning of the token utterance; for instance, as long as the sentence remains part of the play and is not used for some other purpose. Each utterance by Hamlet of 'To be or not to be; that is the question' in a new performance of *Hamlet*, or each inscription of the sentence in a new copy of the play, is to count as the same token. I count it thus, because the context which determines meaning is not the theatre in which the play is produced, or the paper on which it is printed, but the surrounding sentences (and also the author of the play and the audience for which he originally intended it); and when the latter remain the same in those respects which determine the meaning of the sentence, I shall count the context as the same and so the tokens as the same.

Context of utterance can be relevant,⁴ not only in determining the reference of referring expressions and thereby which statement

⁴ Context may be relevant also in determining in what language (or dialect) the sentence is uttered. For there are combinations of noises or written marks which constitute sentences with quite different meanings in different languages. The sentence can only be a sentence of a language spoken by the speaker. If it is a sentence of two languages spoken by the speaker, its relevance to the discussion and its being believed

is expressed by a given proposition, but also in determining which proposition is expressed, where what is said might otherwise have two quite different meanings (in the sense that it could be translated into another language by sentences with quite different meanings). Although linguistic conventions are the main factor in determining which proposition is expressed, and so each token of the same type sentence normally expresses the same proposition, type sentences may have more than one meaning in the sense that different tokens of that type express different propositions, and then we need to know the context of the token sentence in order to disambiguate. 'There are tears on his shirt' may mean that his shirt is torn, or that he has wept on to his shirt. The context of the previous conversation (whether it was about how badly the man was dressed, or about whether something bad had just happened to him) and the state of his shirt will show which proposition is being expressed. So we must add to (1) on p. 10 'and the circumstances of utterance other than those which determine the reference of its expressions referring to individuals and times'.

Almost always a token sentence expresses one of the propositions (has one of the possible meanings for a sentence of its type) which you could discover by using a very full grammar and a very large dictionary; they are meanings already established, in the sense that they are there in the language ready for a new token of its type to have in the right context. When that is so, I shall say that the token sentence has a *literal meaning* of the type sentence. Usually a type sentence has only one literal meaning, and so I'll often talk of 'the' literal meaning. Occasionally, however, as we shall see in Chapter 3, a token sentence may have a meaning created by its context, which was not a possible meaning for the type sentence already established in the language, one which could be discovered from any grammar and dictionary.

Often one of the possible meanings available for a given type sentence is its *normal meaning*: that is, a proposition which speakers of the language with no knowledge of the particular context of its utterance presume it to express in any context unless special features of that

to be understood by the hearer if it is a sentence of one language, rather than another, are the factors which determine of which language the sentence is a sentence. I do not speak Japanese. If I utter noises which constitute either some Japanese sentence or some English sentence equally well, what I have uttered is the English sentence. But if I did speak Japanese as well as English, but all the same the previous conversation was all in English, I had no reason to suppose my hearers to speak Japanese, and the sentence would be relevant to the discussion only if taken as having the meaning of the English sentence, then again I would have uttered the English sentence and not the Japanese one.

context come to their attention. The normal meaning of the sentence, the proposition normally expressed by the sentence 'The king is in the castle', is the proposition that there is a hereditary ruler of a country in a large fortified building with thick walls and strong gates. Context alone will reveal which king and which castle. If, however, for some type sentence independently of context there is no presumption among several meanings that it has one meaning rather than another, I shall count all these meanings as normal meanings of the sentence. 'There are a lot of mines here' seems to me to have two normal meanings, according to whether 'mine' means 'explosive device' or 'shaft or tunnel for digging out substances from underground'. Type sentences also often have literal meanings other than normal meanings which tokens of that type may express in different contexts. Thus 'There is a crook in the next room' will express in almost all contexts the proposition that there is a criminal in the next room. That, therefore, is the normal meaning of the type sentence. But in a context of discussion about sheep or fell-walking, that type sentence will express the proposition that there is a stick or staff with a curved end in the next room; that is another meaning of the type sentence.

A token sentence must be presumed to have among its literal meanings the one (if there is only one) which makes it an appropriate thing to say in the context. This may be because only so would it be relevant to the subject of the conversation; or because otherwise it would be obviously (to the speaker and hearer) false. If with two or more literal meanings the sentence is a natural thing to say in the context, whereas with all other meanings it is not, then it is ambiguous between the two meanings. In a conversation about money hidden in various places, including the sides of rivers, 'I put the money in the bank' will be ambiguous. If with no literal meaning is the sentence a natural thing to say in the context, then the sentence must be taken to have that meaning which makes the sentence the least unnatural thing to say (or, if there is more than one such meaning, to be ambiguous between them).

Which proposition is expressed by a token sentence is thus a function of the possible literal meanings of the type sentence and of the context. Which meanings a type sentence can have is a function of the senses of the component words, and the way in which they are combined. Words of the language have each some one (or sometimes more than one) logico-grammatical status—as noun, adverb, verb, or whatever, of different kinds which logicians have classified. For example, a noun may be a proper name ('George Bush'), a common

name ('philosopher'—the name is common because many different individuals can be philosophers), or a mass noun (a noun designating a kind of stuff such as 'water' or 'gold'). Certain combinations of words are well-formed sentences—that is, ones which have a meaning—and among them are declarative sentences, ones which express statements as opposed to questions or commands. Whether a combination of words is a well-formed declarative sentence depends on the order in which words of different grammatical status follow each other. Logicians have codified many of the possible forms of such sentences. They may, for example, be subject–predicate sentences (sentences attributing a property to an individual or stating a relation to hold between two or more individuals—for example, 'This door is brown' or 'This door is to the left of that door') or universal sentences (sentences attributing some property to all individuals possessing some other property; e.g. 'All emeralds are green') or existential sentences (sentences stating that there exists an individual having a certain property or combination of properties, or one related by a certain relation to some other individual; e.g. 'There is someone somewhere taller than John'). So 'John this desk square' is not a well-formed sentence at all, whereas 'John opens this desk' is a well-formed declarative sentence.

Words have not merely a grammatical status but (within that status) one or more senses. The *sense* of a token word is its context-independent contribution to the meaning of the token sentence to which a word belongs. Almost always a token word has one of the possible senses of that (type) word already established in the language, which you would find in a very large dictionary. Such a sense of a type word I shall call a *literal sense*, and when a token word has one of those senses, it has a literal sense. Often a word has only one literal sense. But many words have more than one literal sense: 'lock' as of a door and 'lock' as of hair, 'pen' for animals and 'pen' to write with. The frame of the rest of the type sentence often makes clear how an ambiguous word is to be taken. In the absence of further information about the context, words are to be understood to have the sense which gives the type sentence its normal meaning. In 'I shut the sheep in the pen', 'pen' is to be taken as an animal pen rather than a pen for writing with, because that is the meaning which the type sentence is presumed to have independent of context, since writing pens are not normally the sort of thing which can contain sheep. However, a token sentence 'I shut the sheep in the pen' could have a meaning other than the normal meaning of the type sentence: for example, in a fairy story about sheep being shut in a giant fountain-pen.

Among the senses of a word there is often one which it is presumed to have in the absence of information about the sentence frame into which it fits or the context of its utterance. This is the contribution which we presume that it will make to the meaning of any type—and so token—sentence in which it occurs in the absence of information that it does not make that contribution (because with a different possible sense the resulting token sentence would be a more appropriate thing to say in the context). I shall call this presumed sense of a word its *normal sense*. Thus the normal sense of 'cold' is that to say that something is cold is to say that it has a relatively low temperature on a scale such as the Centigrade or Fahrenheit scale. But when people and social environments are said to be 'cold', something different is meant. To say that the sense of low temperature is the normal sense is to say that the presumption with respect to any sentence of the form 'x is cold' is that this is what is being said. If there is no presumption between two or more senses or in favour of another sense, then, I shall say, the two or more senses are all normal senses.

So the sentence frame selects among the senses of words to yield the *normal meaning* of the sentence type—that is, the proposition normally expressed by a sentence of that type—although sometimes, as we have seen, if the sentence has more than one normal meaning, a wider context is necessary to choose between meanings.⁵ Context of utterance then adds the reference in order to determine which statement is expressed by the token sentence. It indicates about whom a claim is being made in 'I am old'. The context may sometimes show all the normal meanings of the type sentence to be inappropriate, and so force the token sentence to be understood in a less usual way, and in the process it may force less usual literal senses on the component words. But, as I shall explain more fully in Chapter 3, occasionally the context may show all the literal meanings of the sentence to be inappropriate and so force the token sentence to have a meaning (i.e. to express a proposition) which no one would previously have supposed to be a possible meaning of the type sentence; and that in turn forces a sense on the component words which no dictionary would have listed as a possible sense thereof.

A contrast is often made between *sentence-meaning* and *speaker's meaning*. However, discussions do not always make it clear what

⁵ On how the sentence frame selects the sense of a word within it, see James F. Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), chs. 2 and 3.

contrast is being drawn. Sometimes 'sentence-meaning' is used to mean the literal meaning(s) of the type sentence—that is, the proposition(s) which tokens of the type usually express—while 'speaker's meaning' is used to mean the statement which a given token expresses. I shall not use the expressions in these senses. I shall use 'sentence-meaning' to mean the statement expressed by a given token sentence and contrast it with 'speaker's meaning', the 'meaning' of the speaker in uttering it, in one or other of two useful senses in which this term has been used.

The first clear and useful thing which may be meant by 'speaker's meaning' is the meaning which the speaker meant the token sentence uttered by him to have. Although speaker's meaning will then of course in general coincide with sentence-meaning, it will not do so in those few cases where the meaning which the speaker meant the sentence uttered by him to have is not a meaning it actually has. There are two possibilities under this heading. First, the speaker may not utter the sentence he intended ('meant') to utter, through a slip of the tongue. I may say 'He mumbles a lot', meaning to say, 'He grumbles a lot', because I do not take the trouble to articulate my words. Secondly, the speaker may utter the sentence he intended to utter, but in the false belief that the sentence had a different meaning—that is, expressed a different statement. A student may say 'There are no casual connections between events', meaning that there are no causal connections, through a belief that 'casual' means causal.

The second clear and useful thing which may be meant by 'speaker's meaning' is the information which the speaker intends to convey indirectly by the statement which he expresses (and means to express). Again, there are two possibilities under this heading. First, the speaker may intend to convey not merely what he actually says, but something further. I say, 'It's cold', and thereby hint that I would like you to close the window. I say to a student who arrives late at a morning class, 'Obviously your alarm clock wasn't working this morning,' as a way of pointing out to him that he is late. The token sentence which I utter means one thing (expresses a certain proposition and statement), and by uttering it I say and intend to say that thing; but I say it in order to suggest or hint at something else. Secondly, there are cases where the speaker intends to convey something other than what he says and not the statement which he intentionally expresses. I utter and mean to utter a token sentence which I know has a certain meaning, but I do not intend to convey to you the information contained in that sentence, but something else. One example is where I intentionally utter a false

sentence, intending thereby to convey to you the opposite of what I say, and believing that my sentence will have that effect because I believe that you think I am a liar. Another example is where there is a private understanding between speaker and hearer (a code, say, for use between secret agents) that a certain sentence will be used to convey information other than that which it expresses.

Many examples which are cited as alleged cases where speaker's meaning diverges from sentence-meaning, however, seem to me not to be cases of either of these distinctions, but rather to be cases where the meaning of the token sentence is not the same as any literal meaning of the type sentence. They are cases where the context of utterance gives a new meaning to the sentence, not a meaning which you would find merely by using a very full grammar and a very large dictionary. We shall consider many such cases when we analyse metaphorical meaning in Chapter 3 (and the brief remarks which I am making here should be more easily comprehensible when I discuss examples in that chapter). They are cases where the conventions for understanding the sentence as being used to convey information other than that contained by a sentence of that type uttered in most other circumstances are public ones (not, as above, private ones for use between secret agents). But in such a case the token sentence uttered in the particular circumstances does convey that information, because it has the meaning (of expressing that information) which is other than any literal meaning possessed by sentences of that type. For what the sentence means is just what is determined by public conventions about how the sentence is to be interpreted. Henceforth I shall use 'speaker's meaning' to denote either of the two useful senses distinguished earlier.⁶ In cases where speaker's meaning (in one or other of these senses) is contrasted with sentence-meaning, truth or falsity belongs to the token sentence in virtue of its meaning; and what the speaker meant by uttering it does not affect its truth-value.

⁶ The source of the sentence-meaning/speaker's meaning distinction is the writings of H. P. Grice: 'Meaning', *Philosophical Review*, 66 (1957), 377–88; 'Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning, and Word-Meaning', *Foundations of Language*, 4 (1968), 1–18; and 'Logic and Conversation', in P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, iii (Academic Press, 1975); all these are now republished in Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press, 1989). Grice is well aware of the token sentence/type sentence meaning distinction and the difference between it and a sentence-meaning/speaker's meaning distinction, but the way in which he uses the latter distinction seems to me not always satisfactory. For example, like Searle (as we shall see), Grice regards metaphorical meaning as speaker's meaning.

Not all indicative sentences are declarative. There are sentences which have the grammatical form of an indicative sentence, but which do not claim that things are so, but purport to make them so, and do make them so unless the context of utterance prevents this. Thus 'I promise to pay you \$10' does not purport to report something which is so independently of the utterance of the words, but purports to make something the case. It purports to set up a commitment which did not exist before the words were uttered; and it does set up that commitment, unless the context is unusual, in that the sentence is uttered in the course of a stage play or a translation exercise or something similar. Such sentences are called *performative utterances*.⁷

The sense of a word, I wrote earlier, is its context-independent contribution to the meanings of the type sentences into which it can slot. (For each literal sense of a word) that literal sense is fixed by semantic criteria (paradigm examples of states of affairs which verify sentences containing that word) and syntactic criteria (the immediate logical relations of sentences containing the word to other sentences). That is picked out by the (publicly recognized) verification conditions of sentences in which it occurs, or the verification conditions of sentences in which there occur words to which it is logically related. Verification conditions are circumstances in which sentences containing the word at issue are confirmed or disconfirmed. (To confirm a sentence in the sense in which I shall use the term is to adduce some evidence which supports, counts for, counts in favour of, adds somehow to the probability of, the sentence being true. To disconfirm a sentence is to adduce some evidence which counts against it. Confirmation is thus the weakest way of understanding 'verification', disconfirmation the weakest way of understanding 'falsification'.) Thus the sense of 'red' is given by examples of objects which confirm and examples of objects which disconfirm 'This is red'. Note, however, that the paradigm examples may be regarded by the community as having one or other of two different relations to the sense of the word. To call an object 'red' may be to say that it resembles in colour the paradigm examples of red things as much as they resemble each other. Or it may be to say that it resembles the paradigm examples of red things more than it resembles a whole variety of paradigm examples of objects which are yellow, green, blue, etc. The difference can be crucial. If our paradigm cases of red objects are all

⁷ This terminology was introduced by J. L. Austin; see his 'Performative Utterances', in his *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford University Press, 1961).

of dark red objects, a light red object would not count as 'red' on the first way of applying the semantic criterion, whereas it would so count on the second way. Like all words, even a word so closely related to observation as 'red' also has logical relations to other words, and these also help to give a sense to the word. It is true of logical necessity that 'if it is red, it is coloured' and so 'if it is not coloured, it is not red', and 'if it is green all over, it is not red'; and since 'green' and 'coloured' are also pinned down by paradigm examples, these logical relations also help to give a sharp sense to 'red'. If a word can contribute in two quite distinct ways to the meanings of the type sentences into which it can slot, then it has two (literal) senses. A form of sentence is the form of a declarative sentence if many sentences of that form are confirmable or disconfirmable by experience.

The distinctions made earlier in the chapter relied on the understanding that the meaning of a sentence is a public thing, determined by the publicly accessible criteria of the meanings of words and sentence forms in the language and how context selects among those meanings; not a private thing, determined by the intention of the speaker. I may say, 'You are gauche', intending thereby to say that you are left-wing; but what I actually say is that you are clumsy. Whether a sentence is a well-formed declarative sentence and so expresses a proposition, and what that proposition is, are a matter of whether there are *publicly agreed criteria* for what makes it true and what those criteria are. There are such criteria if (on the whole) speakers agree about which observations or experiences (described in words or indicated by pointing) confirm or disconfirm the sentence; and which other sentences are entailed by, or entail, are compatible or incompatible with, synonymous or not synonymous with, etc., the sentence in question. The existence of agreement on the truth-conditions of 'Once upon a time, before there were humans, the Earth was covered by sea' is shown by the fact that everyone says that it entails 'If there were humans as long as two million years ago, then the Earth was covered by sea more than two million years ago'; and that the sentence would be verified conclusively if a non-human observer could have hovered above the Earth before there were humans and seen it covered by sea, and would be confirmed if in all parts of the Earth were found remains of sea-living creatures dated (by geological criteria) from a certain period of history, and no human remains dated from as early a period. And so on.

Since the meaning of a sentence is a function of the senses of the words which occur in it and the ways in which they are combined,

alternative criteria for a sentence having a meaning are provided by speakers showing in other ways that they understand the senses of the component words and the significance of the form in which they are put together. That will be shown if the speakers show that they understand other sentences in which those words occur or which have the same form as the given sentence, which in turn will be shown by their agreement about when such sentences would be confirmed or disconfirmed by experience, and what their logical relations are to other sentences. Such agreement will be shown either by showing (e.g. pointing to) the circumstances in which they are purportedly verified, or by describing them in sentences, and all agreeing that those circumstances do verify, or those descriptions do describe. Thus agreement on the meaning of 'The lawn is green' is shown by agreement as to what sorts of things are 'lawns', what sorts of objects are 'green', and when sentences of the form '*a is φ* ' are true. There needs to be very considerable agreement about which sentences are true and which sentences are false if words are to have senses, and sentences to have meaning. A declarative sentence is well formed (its words have sense and are properly put together) and thus *meaningful*,—that is, expresses a proposition—if there are conditions (even ones logically impossible of realization) under which it would be true. There are such conditions if speakers agree in what they say on the matters described above. To the extent to which such agreement is lacking, sentences and words lack a clear meaning. Two declarative sentences have different meanings in so far as speakers agree as to how their truth-conditions differ.

While one speaker disagreeing with almost all the other speakers of a language does not damage clarity of meaning—the former speaker simply has not grasped the meaning—substantial disagreement among speakers with respect to the conditions under which a sentence would be true or a word applicable makes the sentence or word to that extent vague in meaning—its use does not then discriminate with respect to those different conditions. If some speakers said, 'The lawn is green', when any large patch of grass with which they were confronted was green, and others said, 'The lawn is green', only when a well-cut patch of grass in a garden was green, and there was a continuum of usage between the groups, in that there were also groups of speakers who used it in various intermediate ways, then the sense of the word 'lawn' would be *vague*. Contrast this with the situation where there are only the two extreme, sharply defined groups. Here we can say that each group is using the word 'lawn' in a different clear sense; and that the language

contains these two senses, and that unless context disambiguates, the sentence 'The lawn is green' is *ambiguous*: that is, it expresses the disjunction of the two propositions which a sentence of that type can express—that either the 'lawn' in one sense is green or that the 'lawn' in the other sense is green.

There would, however, be total agreement about the truth-conditions of a sentence only in so far as there is agreement about *all* the consequences, confirming experiences, and so forth of that sentence and other sentences of the same form and of other sentences in which the words which compose the original sentence appear. But all that some speaker can tell us is that he agrees with us about *some* of what follows from such sentences, would confirm them, and so on. But as there is no end of consequences, confirming experiences, and so on, agreement over some of these does not guarantee agreement over all. Thus two speakers may agree so far with respect to everything observed whether or not it is 'green'. That is good evidence that they mean the same by 'This is green'. But the evidence is fallible, because their subsequent judgements may yet diverge. All the time they may have different concepts of greenness, but this has not come to light, because the only instances about which they have made judgements are ones to which both concepts apply.

This latter point can also be illustrated by Wittgenstein's example⁸ of teaching a pupil the sense of '+ 2'. We think that he has understood when he gives the right answers for the value ' $x + 2$ ' up to the value of $x = 1,000$; but then he surprises us by giving the answers for ' $1,000 + 2$ ' as '1,004', ' $1,004 + 2$ ' as '1,008', ' $1,008 + 2$ ' as '1,012', and so on. We say that he is now performing the different operation of adding 4 instead of the operation of adding 2, yet he claims, 'But I went on in the same way.' Wittgenstein comments, 'In such a case we might say perhaps: It comes natural to this person to understand our order with our explanations as *we* should understand the order: "Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on."' The example shows, on my interpretation of it, that while it looked by his initial responses that he understood '+2' in our way, really he didn't.

A case as extreme as Wittgenstein's of someone who has been taught a word in similar circumstances to those in which the rest of us have learnt it, and who diverges from us so radically in his subsequent use of the word, is not very likely to occur in practice. Humans have such a similar

⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell, 1953), §185.

psychology and neurophysiology to each other that similar procedures of teaching the use of a word are likely to lead to agreement in subsequent judgements in not too dissimilar circumstances as to its applicability and the consequences which follow from sentences in which it occurs.

What is not unlikely, however, is that while similarity in training gives to most or all learners a common understanding of the right way to use a word when it is applied in circumstances similar to the circumstances of training, learners will diverge in their application of the word (to which objects they apply it, which conclusions they derive from it being predicated of an object) when the question arises of its application in circumstances very different from the circumstances of training. To the extent to which this is so, the word has no clear sense when applied beyond circumstances of the kind in which it was originally learnt. I shall have more to say on this point in the next chapter.

I should add that, in saying that for sentences to have meaning there needs to be agreement about (among other things) what would verify them, I am not committing myself to any form of *verificationism*—the doctrine that a declarative sentence is meaningful if and only if it is possible in some sense or other to verify *it*. For a sentence to be meaningful, there needs to be some agreement about what would verify it *or* other sentences of the same form and other sentences in which the same words appear, but I am not claiming that there need always be agreement about the former, let alone that the circumstances which would verify it need be ones in any way capable of realization. We could not understand 'Photons are particles with zero rest mass' unless we could understand 'zero' and 'rest mass', and so the latter words must be related to experience by occurring in confirmable or disconfirmable sentences or being logically related to ones that are. And likewise the sentence form, the way in which the words fit together—in this case a subject–predicate sentence—must be one of which there are instances which can be confirmed or disconfirmed. But it does not follow from all this that a declarative sentence is meaningful only if it itself can in some way be confirmed or disconfirmed. It does seem that we understand a sentence in virtue of understanding the words and how they are put together, without bothering to consider whether that sentence can in any way be verified. And sometimes, while it is obvious to us that we understand what a sentence means—for example, the sentence 'Once upon a time, before there were humans, the Earth was covered by sea'—it is not initially obvious to us how it can be verified. So often we wonder how or whether a sentence can be verified, and we work out

the answer by considering the meaning which we already suppose the sentence to have in virtue of the way in which it is built up. If they could not know the meanings of its sentences before they knew how they could be verified, scientists could not go through the routine of asking what kinds of procedures would verify some scientific theory, as they often do. (There is, however, no need for me to take a stance on whether some very weak form of verificationism is true. If a sentence does need in some way itself to be verifiable in order to be meaningful, we can suppose this added as an additional criterion for meaningfulness.⁹

The meaningfulness of a sentence—that is, its expressing a proposition—is to be distinguished from the *coherence* (i.e. logical possibility or self-consistency) of the proposition which it expresses.¹⁰ ‘He is under 5 ft. and also over 6 ft. tall’ is meaningful; we know what it is saying. But the proposition which it expresses is incoherent—that is, necessarily false. The contrast becomes more obvious in the case of many sentences of mathematics (e.g. ‘ $5 + 7 = 13$ ’ or ‘Every even number is the sum of two prime numbers’); they express propositions which are comprehensible, but the issue arises whether they are ones which are necessarily false (i.e. whether they have buried in them an inconsistency which some piece of mathematical reasoning could draw to the surface). But only if a sentence expresses a proposition at all can it express one which is necessarily false. My concern in this chapter has been only with meaningfulness, not with coherence.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Our understanding of a statement as a claim about how things are is an understanding of something which could be expressed by a sentence if we had a language rich enough to do the job. For a claim that something is so is a claim that the world is this way rather than that way, and so

⁹ There are many different forms of verificationism, varying from the strong form, that for a declarative sentence to be meaningful it must be capable in practice of being verified conclusively by anyone at any time, to the weak form, that for a declarative sentence to be meaningful it must be logically possible for someone or other at some time or other to get evidence which gives some support to the claim that it is true or to the claim that it is false. For further discussion of verificationism, see my ‘Verification and Theories of Space-Time’, in R. Swinburne (ed.), *Space, Time, and Causality* (D. Reidel, 1983), 63–70.

¹⁰ For criteria of coherence, see my *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. edn. (Clarendon Press, 1993), chs. 2 and 3.

something which could be expressed by a sentence if we had words for 'this way' and 'that way'. We may nevertheless not have a language rich enough to express some statement in a sentence, yet have other ways in which to express it.

A natural gesture or symbolic act may (without using words) express a claim that something is so, or express a command or a question, or constitute a performative act—if either because of our inborn psychology, or because of a convention established in a society, many in the society recognize it as doing so.

Natural gestures are such things as kisses, embraces, smiles, grimaces of repulsion, stances of aggression, which, for psychological reasons (without needing a convention to establish them), naturally go with likes or dislikes, joy or sadness. They typically express one's own state, and may also express attitudes towards others, and in so far as intentionally performed in order to do so, may intentionally communicate those attitudes. It is not always clear where the border between the natural and the conventional is to be drawn—some ways of showing affection or repulsion may seem natural, while really being established not by nature but by very early training; but I suspect that some gestures do really go naturally with affection or repulsion. Nevertheless, convention is more important than nature in fixing the significance of communicative actions. To spit at someone is to express dislike and contempt. To hit a child in certain circumstances (e.g. after he has been caught in the act of stealing) constitutes the hitting as punishment, and communicates without words, 'What I am doing to you is punishing'. To take off one's hat or keep silence as a funeral procession passes is to show respect to the dead. If a group of soldiers run up the flag of their country on an unoccupied piece of land, they thereby (performatively) declare the land to belong to their country. And so on. But different societies may understand conventions differently. Even something as primitive as shaking your head horizontally can mean 'no' in some societies, and, I believe, 'yes' in others.

Our society, however, has relatively few symbolic actions with recognized significance. One reason for this is that it is rich in words, and uses those for all purposes. But a deeper reason is that it is much less conscious than were older societies of its role in an ongoing historical tradition of deep significance. Earlier societies had a rich understanding moulded by their histories of the significance of symbolic acts of various kinds, ready to interpret particular token acts. These included acts which re-enact acts of earlier agents, with whom the agent identifies himself

in a common role. To sit at the head of the table is, in some societies, to declare yourself head of the family. To put on the crown of the dead king is to announce yourself as his successor. To put on the mantle of Elijah is to announce that you are the new Elijah, in the sense of the successor who will fulfil the same role towards Israel and God as did Elijah.¹¹

¹¹ 2 Kgs. 2: 13–14.

2

Presupposition

PRESUPPOSITION AND STATEMENT

When you use words to convey information or express a belief or an attitude, it is often easier to do so (you need to use a shorter sentence, and the hearer is more likely to understand it) if you express it in terms of shared presuppositions. Believing that the New York office in which I am conducting a conversation is on the eighty-first floor, and hearing the wind howl outside, I may say, 'The eighty-first floor feels the wind.' But my point is not really about the eighty-first floor, but about the floor on which I believe the office to be situated. Believing that the person to whom you are talking is your cousin, I may say, 'I see you agree with your cousin'. My point is that you agree with the person to whom you are talking; his being your cousin is not an aspect of the situation on which I am commenting, but my belief that your collocutor is your cousin gives me a short way of referring to him.

Sometimes a speaker makes use of the presuppositions of his audience, even when he does not share them, in order to express his belief or whatever. This too is because he can express his belief more succinctly and intelligibly and make it more acceptable to his audience if he uses such a presupposition to clothe his message. Your son is no longer employed at the job he held some months ago with a bank—you think that he resigned, but I suspect that he was dismissed. He looks happier since the change. I seek to say this, and I do so by saying, 'He looks happier since he resigned from the bank.' Because of the irrelevance of such presuppositions to the job which the speaker is trying to do with his sentence, it is natural to understand the sentence as expressing a statement which does not state the presuppositions in terms of which it is cast, and to whose truth-value the truth or falsity of the presuppositions is irrelevant.

Contemporary philosophers have discussed the role of presuppositions mainly in connection with the issue of what to say about the truth-value

of sentences which purport to say something about an individual object purportedly picked out by means of a definite description ('the so-and-so') when there is no object satisfying that description. Now suppose, to use an example much discussed in the philosophical literature, that I am at a party and note a man in the corner, drinking what I take to be Martini, being very cheerful. I seek to comment on his cheerfulness and do so by saying to my companions, 'The man drinking Martini is very cheerful.' However, the man to whom I was intending to refer was drinking not Martini, but sherry. Is what I have said true, false, or neither? Contemporary philosophers are divided on this issue. Some, following Russell,¹ claim that what I have said is false. For it looks as if what I have said is analysable as 'There is a man drinking Martini and he is very cheerful', and since the first conjunct ('There is a man drinking Martini') is false, the whole is false. Others, following Strawson,² claim that it is neither true nor false, for since the referring expression fails to refer, there is nothing for what I say to be true or false about. Yet others may plausibly claim that if the context makes clear to whom I am intending to refer and what I say applies to him, then what I have said is true.³

Our ordinary usage with respect to 'true' and 'false' is not clear enough for us to settle this issue by a simple appeal to usage.⁴ Yet there seems to me reason to adopt a version of the third position, that where public criteria make it clear to what reference is being made—in the sense that others in that context would agree about which object is being referred to (even if the speaker himself did not have the intention of referring to that object)—then the fact that the reference is made by means of a false description does not affect the truth-value of what is said; it does not therefore make it false or neither-true-nor-false. The reason is, I suggest, compelling where it is a presupposition not just of the speaker or one or two of those to whom he was talking, but of the whole culture that the false description applies to the object in question. Others of another culture can see what the public criteria of the first culture pick out, and then pick out the object in question by a route which does not use the presuppositions of the first culture.

¹ 'On Denoting', repr. in Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. Robert C. Marsh (Allen & Unwin, 1956).

² 'On Referring', in P. F. Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (Methuen & Co., 1971).

³ See Additional Note B for the origin of this view in the work of Keith Donnellan.

⁴ See S. A. Kripke, 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference', in P. A. French *et al.* (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (University of Minnesota Press, 1979), on this.

Roman historians may record the deeds of 'the divine Augustus'. Must we judge all the details of his life which they give not to be true just because we think that no Augustus was 'divine'? Biographers tell us mundane details of the life of Gautama ('the Buddha'); if they tell us that 'the enlightened one' did this or that, do we judge what they say false (or neither-true-nor-false) if we think that Gautama was not at all 'enlightened'? The answer in these cases, intuitively, is surely 'No'.

The reason for saying that the falsity of the description in a referring expression does not affect the truth-value of the sentence, so long as there is public agreement in the culture of the utterance about what is the referent, is this. Although speakers may use declarative sentences for many different purposes (e.g. to express their beliefs or attitudes), the paradigm job of such sentences is to convey information, to add to the hearer's stock of beliefs. By a sentence such as 'The divine Augustus travelled to Brindisi', written in the course of conveying other detailed historical information, a Roman historian is seeking to add to his readers' stock of information. He would regard himself as having succeeded if his readers then came to believe that Augustus travelled to Brindisi, whether or not they shared his view that Augustus was divine. That this is what is crucial in the utterance of the sentence would be a view held not merely by the individual speaker but by others of his culture; they would see that as the job of the sentence in that location. The writer and his hearers would see the sentence as false only if Augustus did not travel to Brindisi. If we judge it as false (or neither-true-nor-false) if either Augustus was not divine or he did not travel to Brindisi, we would be taking into account in judging its truth-value an aspect quite other than the writer and his immediate readers would have judged as part of his message; we would have imposed our categories of 'true' and 'false' upon the sentence in virtue of truth-conditions which the speaker and his culture would not have regarded as relevant to the information which the sentence was being used to convey. We would thus be ignoring the close tie between the meaning of a sentence (and so what makes it true or false) and the belief which, other things being equal, speakers in a culture use the sentence to impart. Our account of what made the sentence true or false would not be one sensitive to the normal role of the sentence in the circumstances of its utterance.

But if falsity of description of a referent does not destroy the reference or the truth of what is said about it, so long as there are public criteria for what the referent is, the same should apply to any other false assumptions used in a sentence by means of which a speaker seeks to do

a job quite other than convey those assumptions in terms of which its message is cast. I say, pointing to some water, 'That is a very beautiful river,' but what I point to is not a river, it is a lake. It is nevertheless a beautiful stretch of water. Is what I have said true, false, or neither? I say, in the course of commenting on what Jane (picked out by the referring expression 'Jane') did on some day, 'Jane cooked a meal for her father.' I say this because I believe that the man in whose house Jane lives is her father; but he is not, he is only her stepfather. She nevertheless cooked a meal for him. Is what I have said true, false, or neither?

Again, the answer may not be obvious in these cases. But where not merely the assumptions of speaker and hearer, but the presuppositions of a whole culture, are what lead a typical speaker to convey information by means of a sentence which encapsulates those presuppositions (information quite other than a claim that those presuppositions are true), then we ought, I suggest, to regard the truth or falsity as belonging to a statement which does not contain those presuppositions, although it has been expressed by means of them. This is because the criteria for truth, falsity, and so on of public utterances are those of the whole culture which uses the language, and not those of an individual speaker or hearer who may misuse the language; and those criteria must be ones which pick out the sentence as true if the belief which it would be used to impart by a typical speaker of the language in the context in question is a true one. In order to separate statement from presupposition, we must ask, whatever the speaker's actual beliefs, are there any common beliefs of the culture presupposed in the utterance which can be siphoned off, leaving what the culture would naturally suppose to be its message intact? If there are, we must then judge the truth-value of the utterance by criteria to which the falsity of the presuppositions is irrelevant. I end my biography of Brown by saying that in AD 1650 he 'fell asleep' or 'joined the spirits of his ancestors'. The point of my remark is not to make a theological claim, but to make a biographical one about the date of Brown's death. To assess the remark for truth-value, it is not necessary to have a view about the afterlife. What determines the truth or falsity of 'Brown fell asleep in AD 1650, as uttered in seventeenth-century England, is not whether death is a temporary sleep, but only whether Brown died in AD 1650.

The statement is whatever the speaker, by public criteria, is seeking to add to the existing beliefs of the hearers. This may be expressed in terms of beliefs peculiar to the culture, but must be separable from them, by the above criteria. In that case, even within that culture, the statement

could be expressed (albeit clumsily and at length) in ways that do not use the presuppositions of the culture. If the culture has a way of talking about death which picks it out as an end of life on this Earth without making any assumptions about whether or not there is life after death and of what kind it is, I can express the statement which I attempt to convey by 'Brown fell asleep in AD 1650 without the presupposition that death is a temporary sleep, by writing, 'Brown died in AD 1650.' But such a distinction between statement and presupposition cannot be made if a culture does not have any way of describing the objects or properties at stake other than in ways which encapsulate its peculiar beliefs. If (improbably) the culture could not distinguish between death and normal falling asleep, then the above distinction between the statement and the presupposition could not be made.

To take another example: someone in the eighteenth century might claim (*r*): 'All mammals need to breathe dephlogisticated air in order to stay alive.' He might make this comment in the course of a work on mammals, sharing the belief of his culture that what we call oxygen was air with the phlogiston removed. Now if he has ways of referring to the gas which we call oxygen other than as 'dephlogisticated air'—for example, as the gas which is produced by such-and-such a process, or found in a fairly pure form in such-and-such circumstances—then even if he does not refer to that gas as 'oxygen', he may be said to have the belief that (*s*) 'oxygen' (identified by him and ourselves in many similar ways) 'is dephlogisticated air'. This latter belief is a presupposition which can be separated off from *r* to yield a claim expressed more clumsily (namely, without our word 'oxygen') which was what he was seeking to convey by his original sentence—that is, was his original claim. But if he has no way of referring to oxygen other than as 'dephlogisticated air', then *r* does not presuppose *s*, because the writer does not have a belief that *s*, and *r* is not then about oxygen, but simply about air from which phlogiston has been removed. As there is no such thing, mammals do not need to breathe it in order to stay alive, and *r* is then false. But if the writer shares with his culture the belief *s*, then *r* is true. The presuppositions of a culture must thus be expressible within the culture, if they are to be disregarded for the purpose of judging the truth or falsity of sentences which encapsulate them.

What goes for statements, goes also for commands and questions. The command is a command to do whatever the speaker by public criteria is seeking to get the hearer to do; the question is a question requiring an answer of the kind which the speaker is seeking to elicit

by public criteria. If the command or question can be re-expressed in a sentence which does not use some presupposition of the culture without making any difference to what the speaker is trying to get the hearer to do, then the presupposition is no part of the command or question.

PRESUPPOSITION AND VAGUENESS

The presuppositions of a culture also have a more general influence on the truth-values of its sentences, even when they do not serve as presuppositions. Our language contains words and sentence forms which allow us to describe facts of the world and distinctions between them of which we are aware. And the 'we' has to be more than one; for, as I have emphasized, words and sentence forms can belong to a public language only in so far as there are public criteria for their correct application. I showed in Chapter 1 how speakers share a common understanding of how words and sentence forms come together to form meaningful sentences, an understanding derived from observing how sentences of those forms and containing those words are confirmed or disconfirmed in familiar situations. In virtue of this, they know what sentences of familiar forms using familiar words mean when they are formed to describe situations purportedly not very different from the paradigm ones from which we learn their meaning. But, I commented there, such procedures may give only a vague meaning to sentences formed to describe situations purportedly rather different from the paradigm situations of learning, especially if the possibility of the latter situations was not even envisaged when the words and sentence forms acquired currency in the language. The presuppositions of the culture, about which situations are possible, demarcate the area within which its sentences have clear meaning.

Thus, to put an example from Chapter 1 to a new use, suppose a world in which all objects are similar in colour either to the sky (coloured as now) or to tree leaves in spring (coloured as now). The culture therefore has only two colour words, 'blue' and 'green'. Members of the culture might then make a general claim *s*: 'Everything coloured is either blue or green.' Suppose now that the world changes. Objects appear which are clearly—by our standards of similarity—intermediate in colour between blue and green, but some of them nearer in colour to standard blue things and the others nearer in colour to standard

green things. Has *s* been shown to be false? That depends on whether the intermediate objects which are more blue than green are correctly described as 'blue', and the objects which are more green than blue are correctly described as 'green'. What determines whether they are so describable?

There are two possible situations in which there would be clear answers to the question. The first is that the original culture may have explicitly considered the possibility of intermediate objects, and explicitly laid down (in a dictionary, say) a rule for what is to be said in these circumstances, conceived but not then realized. It may have laid down either that an object is 'blue' if and only if it resembles the so far observed standard blue objects as much as they resemble each other; or that an object is blue if and only if it resembles standard blue objects more than it resembles standard green objects. On the latter definition such an intermediate slightly-more-blue-than-green object would count as blue, on the former it would not. And similar definitions could have been laid down for 'green'. The culture would thus have deliberately prepared itself for new possibilities. And according to which definitions it had laid down, *s* might or might not have been falsified.

The other possible situation in which there would be clear answers to the question is that, although the possibility of the new situation had not been considered in advance, and explicit definitions of 'blue' and 'green' were not available in advance to deal with it, nevertheless, when the new situation occurred, (almost) every member of the culture might agree with every other in their spontaneous judgements as to how to describe the new objects—for instance, that objects nearer in colour to blue than green objects were 'blue'. The original procedures for teaching members of the culture the meanings of the words might have inculcated in the learners concepts of 'blue' and 'green' with much more extensive rules for their application than we would ordinarily suppose that teaching procedures inculcate. In consequence of how members of the culture now applied the words, *s* might or might not have been falsified.

The new situation might, however, be more radically different from the old one than what I have described. I have so far imagined a situation in which all objects were by our standards of similarity clearly more similar to standard blue objects than to standard green objects, or conversely. But now suppose that red objects appear. Would *s* have been falsified, or not? If a definition of 'blue' and 'green' had been provided in advance, everything would turn on how the definition was

interpreted. Are red objects more similar to blue objects than to green objects, or not? Again, (almost) all members of the culture might agree in their judgements one way or the other—which would show that the concepts they had acquired had certain boundaries. If they all judged that red objects were very similar to blue objects, and so to be called ‘blue’, that would show that (despite its initial apparent similarity to our concept) their concept of ‘blue’ was really very different from ours. And if there was no definition of ‘blue’ or ‘green’ in advance, but nevertheless agreement in judgement as to whether the new red objects were or were not ‘blue’ (or were or were not ‘green’), that would settle whether *s* had been falsified, and thereby show us more precisely how they understood ‘blue’ (and ‘green’) and so, more precisely, which statement was being expressed by the sentence *s*.

However, given rational creatures not very different from us human beings, neither of these possibilities is likely to arise. There is a narrow limit to the worlds very different from our own which humans are equipped (either via a definition or not) to describe. For the most likely scenario when the world changed colour in the first respect is that humans would differ about how to describe the new objects and so about the truth-value of *s*. When red objects appeared, probably most humans would judge *s* false, but it is not at all unlikely that some of them might detect a sufficient similarity between (e.g.) blue objects and red ones for them to judge *s* to be true. These various possible situations thus reveal that the meaning (i.e. the public meaning) of *s* is vague, because there would be no public agreement about what constitutes its truth-conditions in these situations.

The learning situation of humans typically equips them with capacities for judgement about the applicability of concepts in many situations, but not in further situations. The reason for this is that humans are not clones of each other; and in consequence they have slightly diverse psychological and physiological make-up from each other, which limits sharply the extent to which they will agree spontaneously, without using an explicit definition, on how words are to be used in new situations. And humans will have devised explicit definitions for how words should be applied at most to those situations which the culture regards as likely or at least possible. For those situations are the only ones for which the culture might have ‘thought through’ how its words are to be applied. Since humans have finite imagination, there are limits to their abilities to conceive of possible situations; hence the presuppositions of the culture about which situations are likely or possible delimit the area of

situations for which there are clear criteria for when their sentences are true or false.⁵

What applies to my simple colour example applies completely generally. Consider a quite different kind of word: 'adultery'. Learners may be introduced to this word by being told that 'adultery is having sexual intercourse with someone else's spouse'. But the culture will have a certain limited conception of the possibilities of intercourse and of marriage. It might only know of 'normal' sexual intercourse between male and female, and marriage as a state brought about by pledges by one male and one female of lifelong fidelity to each other. In that case, the teaching 'Adultery is always wrong' (*r*) would have clear consequences for many situations conceivable by the members of that culture—for example, that if John is married to Mary, it would be wrong for him to have sexual intercourse with Jane. But other societies might have thought of and practised ways of familiarity very similar to 'sexual intercourse', ways which can be practised between male and male, or between female and female; and of pledges of fidelity with various qualifications attached to them (e.g. pledges to be faithful if the woman is capable of child bearing, etc.). The question then arises as to which kinds of familiarity are, given *r*, forbidden by which kinds of pledge? Our original society may or may not have thought through some of these possibilities explicitly, or may be so uniformly conditioned by nature and nurture as to have no hesitation in its judgements about which among certain kinds of relationship not yet realized would constitute 'adultery'. But there are further situations conceivable (though not currently realizable), such as societies in which the most intensely desired kind of intimacy has no connection at all with child bearing, or societies in which there are three sexes (and of course what that amounts to depends on how the concept of a 'sex' is understood). Humans have natural inclinations to apply words slightly differently from each other in new situations unless we have a definition to provide guidance. But we will not have definitions

⁵ Whatever the presuppositions of the culture, there will always be *some* possible cases on the border between being instances and non-instances of a concept—some possible object on the border in colour between clearly blue and clearly non-blue, between being less than 6 cm long and 6 cm long. For any concept one can conceive of objects further and further away from standard cases of its applicability until we come to cases on the border between applicability and non-applicability. In this respect no concept can be perfectly exact. My point in the text is that the border between the applicability and the non-applicability of a concept may be a vast area of uncertainty, not a mere point of transition, because human learning (contingently) does not provide humans with sufficiently exact concepts.

of any use unless society has taken account of possible situations and devised definitions of how words should be used in those situations; and whether it has will depend on its presuppositions as to what is possible or likely. So the presuppositions of the society limit how it understands 'Adultery is always wrong' and the extent to which that gives clear guidance for conduct.

One writer who stressed the influence of presuppositions on our thought was Collingwood.⁶ All propositions, he claimed, presuppose things. These presuppositions can be stated and, if 'relative' rather than 'absolute', can be argued about. But he did not bring out how presuppositions can act so as to limit the clarity of sentences with respect to unconceived circumstances. One writer who did do this was Waismann.⁷ He claimed that many 'empirical concepts' (i.e. ones applied to objects in virtue of observable features) have what he called 'open texture'. He claimed that 'no definition of an empirical term will cover all the possibilities'. Any attempt to lay down the conditions of use of some term will never be able to cater for every possibility, because it is always possible, Waismann claimed, that he might have some totally new experience 'such as at present I cannot even imagine', or that some new discovery may affect our whole interpretation of facts. He did not claim that such 'open texture' is a feature of all empirical concepts, yet he seems to claim that it is an essential feature of most concepts.

I cannot see that Waismann has given any argument that this is essential to concepts as such. But his point remains a very important one about the concepts picked out by words of a language used by creatures of finite imagination who are not clones of each other; and hence a very important contingent truth about human beings or similar rational creatures.

CONTEXT AND STANDARD OF ACCURACY

A final connected point is that sentences are normally uttered to convey information in certain particular contexts of enquiry, which have their own standard of the kind of accuracy required. To convey information

⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Clarendon Press, 1940), §47.

⁷ F. Waismann, 'Verifiability', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 19 (1945), 119–50; repr. in A. G. N. Flew (ed.), *Logic and Language*, 1st ser. (Blackwell, 1951). The quotations are from pp. 121–4 of the reprinted version.

to guide conduct quickly and easily, it is often best to do so by means of a sentence which is, if we speak strictly, inaccurate and ignores qualifications and exceptions. We may describe an object as 'round' even if it is not of a shape which satisfies the geometer's definition of 'round' in the sense of being a shape each of the points of whose bounding line is equidistant from a central point. We may describe an object as round if the context of discussion is such that objects quite similar to such geometrically 'round' objects count as 'round'.⁸ The context of discussion will have that character if very accurate information about geometrical shape is not important for behaviour, and if the words being used are sufficiently accurate to suggest to the hearers the discrimination important for behaviour. If the only objects within range are either roughly square or roughly round, and I am giving instructions to a hearer as to which objects to pick up, I will say, 'Pick up the round one to your left', so long as only one object to the hearer's left is approximately round.

Another important example of a sentence being true being a matter of its truth-conditions being satisfied to the degree of accuracy appropriate in the context is provided by sentences of the form 'All As are B'. Whether one exception to 'All As are B' is enough to render the sentence false depends on the context. If 'All As are B' is a purported theorem of mathematics (e.g. 'All rectilinear triangles have internal angles whose sum is 180° '), then one exception renders the sentence false; but if it is a sentence in a guidebook describing general features of some country (e.g. 'All the inhabitants speak English'), one exception does not render the sentence false. The sentence is true (to the limits of accuracy appropriate in the context).

⁸ In discussing sentences which give a very rough description, J. L. Austin comments with regard to the sentence 'France is hexagonal', 'it is a rough description; it is not a true or false one'. See his *How to Do Things with Words* (Clarendon Press, 1962), 142. I suggest that it is (in any context) a rough description; but, dependent on the standard of accuracy expected in the context, it may be either true or false.

3

Analogy and Metaphor

ANALOGY

I argued in Chapter 1 that a literal sense of a word is fixed by semantic criteria (which paradigm states of affairs confirm or disconfirm sentences containing it) and syntactic criteria (the logical relations of sentences which contain it to other sentences). As I commented in Chapter 1, words may have more than one literal sense: 'bank' may mean edge of a river or place where money is kept. It seems a natural use of the terms 'univocal', 'analogical', and 'equivocal', consonant with their role in the history of comment on language, to mark cases where a given token word ' φ ' is used in the same sense as, in a similar sense to, and in a dissimilar sense from another token ' φ ' of the same type. I shall say that a word ' φ ' is used on two occasions in a univocal sense if it is used in the same sense, in an analogical sense if it is used in a similar sense, in an equivocal sense if it is used in a dissimilar sense. Distinctions between the 'univocal', the 'analogical', and the 'equivocal' can be made in more than one way. What I would claim for my way of making the distinction is that it is a fairly natural and useful one, and gives to these terms a use similar to uses which many others have given to them in the history of thought. But it needs to be kept in mind that some writers use these words, as also the words 'literal' and 'metaphorical', in very different ways from other writers. We shall see this in due course with respect to Aquinas's use of 'analogical'.

Two tokens of the same type word will have the same sense if they have the same paradigm examples of their correct application and the same logical relations to other words—that is, senses determined by the same syntactic and semantic criteria for their application. James F. Ross, in his *Portraying Analogy*,¹ has analysed sameness, similarity, and

¹ James F. Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

difference of sense in a careful and sophisticated way in terms of syntactic criteria. The essence of his account is that two token words have the same sense if (and only if) they have all the same synonyms, contraries, and determinates, and are determinates of the same determinables; similar senses if they have many of the same synonyms, and so on; dissimilar senses if they have few of the same synonyms, and so on. He introduced the category of a predicate scheme. Consider the words which can be substituted for a given word ' φ ' in some sentence, while leaving the sentence, in Ross's terminology, 'acceptable', which I shall understand simply as 'well formed'.² Thus you can replace 'boy' in 'The boy asked for a job' by 'girl', 'old man', 'plumber', or 'carpenter'. But only some of the substitutes are meaning-relevant: that is, have with the original word such connections of meaning as being synonyms,³ contraries, determinates of the same determinable, having the same determinates, and so on—as in this example do 'girl' and 'old man', but not 'plumber' or 'carpenter'. The meaning-relevant substitutes for a word form its predicate scheme. Two token words of the same type are being used univocally with respect to each other if they have the same predicate scheme (the same synonyms, contraries, determinables, etc.); are being used analogically with respect to each other if they have significantly overlapping predicate schemes; and are being used

² Although Ross does not define an 'acceptable' sentence, he suggests that it is at least a well-formed sentence of the language which preserves the consistency or inconsistency of the original sentence (ibid. 58); it seems to me that this understanding of 'acceptable sentence' makes for unnecessary complication, and that we should understand by 'acceptable' simply 'well formed'.

³ Ross prefers to talk of 'near-synonyms'. However, in view of there being a satisfactory test for the more precise notion of 'synonym' itself, it seems to me preferable to use the latter. A token word ' φ ' in a token sentence p (e.g. ' a is φ ') is synonymous with ' ψ ' if and only if the substitution of ' ψ ' for ' φ ' would yield a token sentence q (viz. ' a is ψ ') synonymous with p . p and q are synonymous sentences if and only if (for all A) ' A believes that q ' (uttered in the same context as p) is logically equivalent to ' A believes that p ' (and if all other replacements of p by q in belief contexts yield logically equivalent sentences: e.g. ' A believes that B believes that p ' is logically equivalent to ' A believes that B believes that q '). So—if we ignore for the moment the final bracket of the definition—by this test in most token sentences of the type 'John is a bachelor', 'bachelor' is synonymous with 'unmarried man'. For 'I believe that John is a bachelor', said in a context of discussing John's personal relationships, is logically equivalent to 'I believe that John is an unmarried man' said in that context. These are logically equivalent in the sense that each entails the other. Hence 'John is a bachelor' is synonymous with 'John is an unmarried man', uttered in the same context. The final bracketed clause can normally be ignored. But, as was pointed out to me by Roy Sorensen, it is required to rule out odd counter-examples, such as that although ' A believes that someone exists' is logically equivalent to ' A believes that A exists', ' A exists' is not synonymous with 'Someone exists'.

equivocally with respect to each other if their predicate schemes do not overlap significantly.

Thus, in 'All bachelors are lonely', uttered on a certain occasion, 'bachelor' has the same sense as when it is used in 'All bachelors are happy', for in each it has the same synonyms (e.g. 'man who has never married'), contraries ('married man', 'widower', 'divorced man', 'unmarried woman', etc.), is a determinate of the determinable 'man', and has as its determinates such expressions as 'bachelor under 20 years old', 'bachelor between 20 and 30 years old', etc. and 'bachelor who wishes to be married', 'bachelor who does not wish to be married'.

Ross's account of univocity goes back to that given by Aristotle.⁴ Ross, however, has applied these notions in a more detailed way to analogy than did either Aristotle or any of his successors. Among the hundreds of examples which he discusses, he considers eighteen examples of different uses of the word 'charged'. Some of these are univocal, and some are equivocal with each other, and others are analogous to each other (and the extent of analogy varies). Thus 'charged' in (1) 'He charged the gun before firing it' is equivocal to its use in (2) 'He charged the jury, explaining law and facts' (where this 'He' presumably refers to a judge.); there are no common synonyms, contraries, or determinates (and, he could have added, they are determinates of virtually no common determinables). Whereas the use of 'charged' in (3) 'He charged his assistants to watch the financial markets' is analogous to its use in (4) 'He charged her with information as to her opponents' (in the sense of loaded her up with it). 'For', writes Ross, 'the former allows as near-synonyms "instructed", "informed", "ordered", "commanded", and "directed", but [the latter] does not allow "ordered", "commanded" or "directed" yet does allow "instructed", "informed" and the like.'⁵

An important case of analogy is where a word with its predicate scheme is removed from one context and applied in another—which occurs, for example, when the word comes to be used in an abstract sense:

Thus in 'the arch *carries* the weight of the roof', we could substitute 'bears', 'holds', 'sustains', or 'supports'. So too in 'the first premise *carries* the weight of the argument'. The first mentioned near-synonyms for the first occurrence are also near-synonyms for the second.⁶

⁴ Aristotle, *Topics*, 106^a–107^b.

⁵ Ross, *Portraying Analogy*, 100–1.

⁶ Ibid. 108.

Yet one set of words (with their contraries, determinates, etc.) is 'a contrast in modes by which one physical object is said to impede the gravitational pull on another', while the other does 'not presuppose physical activity at all'. Hence the implications of the two 'carries' are different, and this will emerge with them or their synonyms having some different contraries, determinates, and so forth. One 'carries' is a species of 'exerts a physical force on'; the other is a species of 'gives logical support to'. Or consider the two uses of 'sharp' in 'He has a sharp mind' and 'The knife has a sharp edge'. Both have as synonyms 'acute', 'penetrating', and perhaps 'keen'. But contraries for the former use alone include 'blunt' and 'smooth', while contraries for the latter use include 'muddled' and 'obtuse'. Hence the words are used in senses analogous to each other.

Analogy is on this account a matter of degree. Uses of words are analogous to the extent to which they have the same synonyms, contraries, and so on; so some uses of words are more closely analogous than others. When uses of tokens of the same type have few of the same synonyms, contraries, and so on, they are being used equivocally. Tokens of 'bank' meaning river bank are then straightforwardly equivocal with tokens of 'bank' meaning money-shop. They have no common synonyms, and no contraries at all; 'bank' in the former sense but not in the latter sense is a determinate of the determinable 'geographical feature', whereas in the latter sense but not in the former sense it is a determinate of the determinable 'building', and so on. But there is still some little similarity, because both tokens are determinates of the determinable 'physical object', but nowhere nearly enough similarity to constitute analogy.

Ross's tests clearly elucidate the syntactic criteria for two token words having the same meaning, but we need also semantic criteria. Consider the word 'red'. 'Red' does not have any synonyms, but it has plenty of contraries—'blue', 'green', etc. Any use of 'red' is the use of a determinate of 'coloured'; and its own determinates are such terms as 'light red', 'medium red', and 'dark red'. But the fact that two speakers both acknowledge these syntactic criteria for the use of 'red' is not sufficient to ensure that they mean the same by 'This is red'. For one speaker may have a very wide understanding of 'red', so as to include many objects as 'red' which another speaker would call 'scarlet' or 'orange', while the first speaker might only use the latter words of a very narrow class of objects in which there is not the slightest tinge of red. More generally, we may have the same words for dividing the

colour spectrum, but make the divisions in different places. So we must add a semantic criterion. For two uses of a word to have the same sense, there must be agreement about the verification conditions of the words. Thus for 'red' to be used in the same sense, two speakers who know enough about the objects must apply 'This is red' to the same group of (possible⁷) objects. Like satisfaction of the syntactic criteria, satisfaction of this semantic criterion is a matter of degree. Speakers may count all, or almost all, or mostly the same objects as 'red'. And similar semantic criteria are required to show that two predicates which apply not to objects, but to actions or events, or words in other grammatical categories have the same sense. It is a consequence of the semantic criterion that if some predicate is to have only one sense, one cannot both affirm and deny that it applies without qualification to the same object; one cannot say of the same object 'It is (fully) φ and it is (fully) not- φ ' (though one can of course say that it is (partly) φ and (partly) not φ).

So I repeat my earlier definition that two token words of the same type are used (with respect to each other) univocally (have the same sense) if and only if there are the same semantic and syntactic criteria for their use; analogically if and only if there are largely the same semantic and syntactic criteria for their use; and equivocally if and only if there are largely dissimilar semantic and syntactic criteria for their use.

Among the equivocal in my sense are words related by what Ross calls denominative analogy.⁸ Here the token word is used to designate something which has a certain relation to the objects or situations to which other tokens of the same word apply. We call things Victorian if they resemble things typically current in the Victorian period.⁹ One instance of this is where the relation is causal or significative: namely, an object is called ' φ ' because it is the cause of things being ' φ ' or shows them to be ' φ '. To use the example used by Aquinas, a diet is 'healthy'

⁷ I pointed out in Ch. 1 that speakers might agree about whether a word applies or does not apply to the same objects so far examined, while (although they might not realize this) they would disagree about whether the word applies to other possible objects. Agreement on the latter is also required for the word to be being used in the same sense, so we can have only inductive evidence (though often very strong inductive evidence) that two speakers are using a word in the same sense.

⁸ This is Aquinas's 'analogy of attribution', according to Cajetan's simple account of Aquinas's system. See B. Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 37–8. Aquinas seems to have classified kinds of analogy differently at different stages of his thought. On this see *ibid.* ch. 2.

⁹ Ross, *Portraying Analogy*, 123.

if it causes a man to be 'healthy', and urine is 'healthy' if it is a sign of a man being 'healthy'. But although there is a connection of meanings, one is not saying something similar of urine and the diet in describing them both as 'healthy'.

METAPHOR

When what is said is obviously (to speaker or writer, and hearers or readers) inappropriate—that is, irrelevant or false in the context in which words are being used in any literal senses—we reasonably suppose that language is being used in an unusual way, that is figuratively.¹⁰ Figures of speech include irony, meiosis, litotes, hyperbole, etc., and also metaphor.¹¹ Although different writers may use this word (as they also use the word 'analogy') in slightly different senses from each other, the definition I am about to give does, I think, capture what is distinctive about many uses of words or expressions which have been called 'metaphorical'.¹² I need to show how metaphor so defined works, because, like analogy, it is used frequently in sentences of theology. I shall say that a use of a word ' φ ' in some context is metaphorical if it is being used not to designate φ things but rather to designate a feature believed to be distinctive of the objects, activities, or whatever denoted by ' φ ' in one of its pre-existing senses (a feature which belongs necessarily or contingently to those objects, etc., or is generally believed to belong, or is suggested by the objects). Different contexts will often make different features distinctive. When a word is being used in a literal sense, then mere knowledge of the language in which a token sentence containing it is uttered shows the possible contributions which it can make to

¹⁰ H. P. Grice classically elucidated the maxims of normal conversation. To conform to these, the speaker has to say what is neither more nor less than an appropriate response to previous remarks, what is true, backed up by evidence, unambiguous, etc. See Paul Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', repr. in his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press, 1989). My account in these chapters of how context determines the sense of an expression, put in his terms, is that, if we can, we should construe an expression in a sense in which the speaker would be obeying the maxims of normal conversation.

¹¹ For the general notion of figurative language, and elucidation of some of the other tropes, see Robert J. Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (Yale University Press, 1988).

¹² Quite a lot of what I have to say about metaphor, as well as some of what I have said in Chapter 1 about how we determine which proposition is expressed by some sentence, is also to be found in the developed account of metaphor of Eva Feder Kittay, *Metaphor* (Clarendon Press, 1987).

the meaning of that sentence. Context of utterance may be needed to discriminate between possible senses; but that context is not needed for the purpose of generating a possible sense to start with. Metaphor arises when a word or words are not being used in any literal senses, or in any new sense given an explicit definition, but where knowledge of a wide context—a lot of information about where the token sentence containing the word was uttered, by whom, in what circumstances, against what background of common assumptions—will reveal what is being said. The sense is a new one, generated by the context and by a previous literal sense of the word together. The new sense may be analogical with the old one, or it may not be. (It might, for example, on the contrary exemplify denominative analogy.) If similar metaphors are used frequently, the sense becomes an established one, and the use in that sense is no longer metaphorical. (The metaphor is dead.) When a token sentence contains words used metaphorically, not merely does it have a meaning other than a normal meaning of sentences of its type, but it has a meaning other than any literal meaning of sentences of its type. I shall call such a sentence and also the meaning which it has metaphorical.

I illustrate:

1. Wittgenstein paints in oils rather than water-colours.
2. Cynthia proved to be a hedgehog.
3. Eliot took poetry off the gold standard.
4. Jane was not so much the last rose of summer, but the first winter jasmine.
5. No iceberg melts in winter.
6. Computer failure will often lead to your take-off being aborted.
7. If you open up a can of worms, you should be able to catch quite a lot of fish.
8. Here comes Ronald Reagan.

All of these sentences, except perhaps (3), have (at least one) literal meaning with words used in literal senses, which can be supposed to be the meaning of a token of these types in the absence of information about the context of their utterance. But information about the context of a given token (e.g. that 'Jane' and 'Cynthia' were used to denote female humans; or that (8) was spoken about my friend John) may rule out all literal meanings. Each of these sentences could acquire a whole

variety of new meanings, and so some of their words acquire a whole variety of new senses according to the context; no dictionary could list all the possible senses. (2), for example, may be a description of how Cynthia looks, or how she behaves in her personal relations, and in the latter case it could utilize different features believed to be true of hedgehogs to make different comparisons. It could be saying that in her sexual relationships, or in her relationships with employers, or in her relationships with friends, she 'clams up' unless approached with extreme gentleness and tact; or alternatively that she is very 'prickly', takes remarks the wrong way if that is possible, is quick to resent the slightest suggestion that there is anything wrong with her. (6) could be used in the course of a description of a whole variety of human activities; and what corresponds to 'computer failure', 'take-off', and 'abortion' will vary in each case. One use, but obviously only one use, could be to make the point that getting to know a certain person is difficult, you seem to be beginning to exchange confidences and talk readily when some irrelevant accident outside your control makes your relationship much more formal.

When a token sentence is obviously inappropriate when understood as having any of its literal meanings, we look for another meaning. Context may suggest that it is a case of irony or hyperbole or some other trope, and these are usually fairly easy to recognize. If someone is saying the exact opposite of what we would expect him to say and that person often uses irony or he has uttered the sentence in an ironical tone, then it is reasonable to interpret what is being said as ironical. But if there are no other natural interpretations which would make the sentence a natural (appropriate, relevant) thing to say in the context, we should seek an explanation in terms of the speaker (author) using words metaphorically. To do this, we consider the statement which would be made by the sentence if some words are taken not in any literal sense, but as designating features believed distinctive (in the context) of the objects, activities, etc. denoted by ' φ ', either necessary features or contingent features or ones suggested by φ -things or ones merely believed to belong to φ -things. Words which in their literal senses denote aspects of the discussion in which the sentence occurs are, however, other things being equal, to be retained in those senses. All of this will throw up many possible meanings for the sentence. If with only one of these is the sentence a natural, relevant thing to say in the context, that is the meaning the sentence has. If on no metaphorical or other figurative interpretation is the sentence a natural, relevant thing

to say in the context, it must be understood as having the meaning (whether a literal meaning, or one thrown up by the context) which makes it the least unnatural thing to say, and that might sometimes be just the normal meaning. If on more than one interpretation it is equally natural and relevant, then the sentence is ambiguous and may be true on one interpretation and false on another.¹³

For example, take (1). Suppose it occurs in a context in which Wittgenstein or philosophers generally are being discussed. Then 'Wittgenstein' has to be taken to refer, in accordance with normal conventions of reference, to the philosopher Wittgenstein. If the discussion were about which philosophers painted and how they painted, then the sentence could be supposed to have its literal meaning. But suppose, more plausibly, that it occurs in a discussion of Wittgenstein's style of argument. Then if it had its literal meaning, it would not be a natural, relevant thing to say, and we must look for a different meaning. One distinctive feature of painting in oils as opposed to water-colours is that you dab the paint on to points rather than stroke it on with flowing strokes over a wide area. The work of art is constructed by many separate contributions rather than by fewer connected contributions. What this suggests in the case of writing philosophy is making many separate points which produce a total integrated view, rather than a number of connected arguments in which there is a flow of thought; and that of course is characteristic of Wittgenstein's style. There are, no doubt, also other distinctive features of oil painting as opposed to water-colour painting, but in the absence of any of them having obvious relevance to philosophical style, we take the one suggested. The sentence says that Wittgenstein wrote philosophy by making a large number of separate points which give a total view, rather than a number of longer connected arguments. The sentence can now be assessed for truth or falsity.

Or take (8), and suppose it to have been uttered in 1980. There are of course plenty of contexts in which it would have had its literal meaning. But suppose it to be uttered when a man, John, known not to be Ronald Reagan, comes into the room, then the beliefs of speaker and hearer about John and Ronald Reagan may be such as to give it a

¹³ My account of how one determines the meaning of a metaphorical utterance owes quite a lot to John R. Searle, 'Metaphor', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), esp. 113–20. But for Searle, as we shall see shortly, such factors as those described in the text determine not the meaning of a token sentence, but rather what the speaker meant to convey by uttering the sentence; for Searle the token sentence has only a literal meaning of its type sentence.

new meaning which makes it relevant to the context. If the surrounding conversation has been about the fact that, although John is a friendly man, he has recently made a speech advocating the reintroduction of the death penalty, then the common belief of society that Reagan is a popular, friendly conservative, an actor who appeals to gut old-fashioned attitudes with no sensitivity to liberal values or the subtleties of issues, shows what I mean when I say, 'Here comes Ronald Reagan'; I mean that John is like Reagan in these respects.

Metaphorical sentences are often very vague; there is often a wide border area of possible states of affairs which are such that in them the metaphorical sentence is neither true nor false. In a conversation about Cynthia touching on both her appearance and her personal relations, it may be quite unclear just how hedgehog-looking and clamming-up or prickly in her behaviour she has to be in order for 'Cynthia proved to be a hedgehog' to be true. If the conversation has been long and detailed, and the assumptions of its participants (about Cynthia and hedgehogs) are detailed and evident, that would make the truth-conditions sharper than they would otherwise be; but there might still be quite a wide border area (a large number of possible states of Cynthia), in which it would be neither true nor false to say 'Cynthia proved to be a hedgehog'. All sentences have border areas for their truth—when the curtains are bluish green, it is in many contexts (e.g. with 'blue' and 'green' as the only colour words available) neither true nor false to say 'The curtains are green'. The difference is that when they have a truth-value, metaphorical sentences have wider border areas than most other sentences, in that for many contexts (when the conversation has not been going on for long and the assumptions of the participants are not evident) there is a wide border area of possible states of affairs in which they are neither true nor false. Sometimes, however, it must be acknowledged, it is just so unclear what kind of comparison is being made by a metaphorical sentence that it cannot be said to have a truth-value at all. However, I would claim, given that the sentence occurs in the course of a long conversation or a long passage of writing with a clear subject-matter, a metaphorical sentence is normally such as to be true under some conditions of the world and false under others.

Metaphorical sentences may or may not be paraphrasable by non-metaphorical sentences. Thus some distinctive feature of the objects picked out by the word ' φ ' used metaphorically may be one for which the community has a word with the requisite literal sense. Or the community

may not have such a word. In that case a metaphorical sentence containing 'φ' used in the requisite sense will not be paraphrasable by a non-metaphorical sentence. Such a metaphor is a 'creative' metaphor, in that it enables us to 'see' things which we had not seen before.

The account of metaphor which I have given is in some ways a very considerable elaboration of what is known as the comparison theory of metaphor, paradigmatically expounded by Aristotle.¹⁴ This holds that when 'S is P' makes a metaphorical assertion, it means the same as the simile 'S is like P', and similarly for sentences of other forms. But this will not do as it stands. In a metaphorical assertion some words are, and some words are not, being used in literal senses, and we need a context to show which words are being used in which senses. In (5) above, for example, 'iceberg', 'melts', and 'winter' may all be being used in new senses. Also, everything is like everything else in some respect, and one could not say that either 'Man is a wolf' or 'Man is like a wolf' is either true or false, without taking account of a lot of context to show the kinds of respect in which comparison is being made. Also, the comparison is sometimes not with the object or property or activity apparently referred to, but with something believed to be associated with it. To reveal what comparison is being made, we need, once again, context. Black's 'interaction' account of metaphor¹⁵ claims that a metaphorical assertion forces a system of commonplaces associated with one subject (wolf) on to another (man): 'the metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the principal subject (man) by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject (wolf).' Again, this seems on the right lines, but needs to be developed to show how context determines which words have to be associated with such a system and how it picks the features for comparison, and how it applies to sentences other than subject–predicate sentences,

Both Black and comparison theory allow that metaphor yields claims which can be assessed for truth or falsity. But Searle and Davidson¹⁶ have both claimed that the only meaning which metaphorical sentences have is a literal meaning; but that by uttering a sentence with that meaning,

¹⁴ Aristotle held that the difference between simile and metaphor is 'but slight', e.g. between calling Achilles a lion and describing him as being like a lion (*Rhetorica*, 1406^b).

¹⁵ M. Black, 'Metaphor', in his *Models and Metaphor* (Cornell University Press, 1962), 44–5.

¹⁶ D. Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

the speaker manages to convey to the hearer a quite different idea. Man is not a wolf, but saying that he is helps the hearer to see man as a wolf. Searle expresses this view by distinguishing speaker's meaning from sentence-meaning and claiming that metaphorical meaning is speaker's meaning. The difficulty with this way of putting things is that, as Soskice well illustrates,¹⁷ and as Searle and Davidson explicitly point out, while the token sentence '*a* is φ ' used to make a metaphorical utterance will very often be false, this would have little tendency to make the simile '*a* is like φ ' also false. That seems implausible when—to use Soskice's example—we take a developed metaphor like 'Human language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity', and compare it with Flaubert's actual simile: 'Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity.' Surely the truth-conditions of simile and metaphor are largely the same; what makes the simile true (false) is very largely what makes the metaphor true (false). However, we should note that the truth-conditions of a metaphor '*a* is φ ' and its corresponding simile '*a* is like φ ' are not exactly the same. The simile may be making a comparison in respect of the overall similarity between *a* and φ ; while the metaphor may be commenting on a narrow kind of similarity between those things, or between *a* and something associated with φ . And the truth-conditions will differ in the respect that what makes the metaphor true is *a* being similar to the way φ is generally believed to be, whether or not it is that way at all. If 'Cynthia proved to be a hedgehog' is being used to make the true statement that she is 'prickly', the sentence would not be shown to be false by a discovery that hedgehogs are not really prickly at all; whereas the corresponding simile 'Cynthia is like a hedgehog' could be shown to be false by this discovery.

Given my Chapter 1 definition of the distinction between speaker's meaning and sentence-meaning, Searle's claim that metaphorical meaning is speaker's meaning cannot be accepted. Metaphor does not involve the speaker saying something other than what he means to say; nor does it involve the speaker meaning what he says (in a normal sense) but hinting at something further or hoping that the speaker will come to believe something other than what was said as a result of having private criteria for interpreting it. It is rather that the speaker uses a sentence

¹⁷ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon Press, 1985), 92.

which, independent of context, would mean one thing but which in the context (as shown by public criteria) means something else.

There is a wide, unclear border between metaphor and analogy as I have defined them. Not all metaphors force analogical senses on words. For a word may be used metaphorically to designate a property contingently associated with the property which it normally designates, without there being any similarity of meaning between the two uses—as does ‘is a wolf’ when it is used to designate the property of selfish ferocity which wolves are believed to exhibit, but which is not a defining criterion of being a wolf. And when an analogical sense created by a metaphor passes into established use, that use is no longer (on my definition) metaphorical; but it is vague (on that definition) how frequently and in what circumstances a word needs to be used in a sense for that sense to become established, and so to acquire a new literal sense.

Declarative sentences are sometimes uttered not in order ultimately to get us to believe them but simply in order to get us to think along the lines which they suggest. This is especially the case with sentences in poetry. Barring the case of fiction, the sentences nevertheless do have a truth-value, even if it is not important for the writer or speaker what that is. If what is said seems odd and outlandish when taken with a literal meaning, either context will force a metaphorical meaning upon it, and then that can be assessed for truth or falsity; or it will not, and in that case what is said must be taken with its literal meaning, at its face value. Either way, the sentence has a truth-value. But just as context is crucial for clarifying what the meaning of the sentence is, so context will often also make clear whether the speaker is trying to get us to believe what the sentence says, or whether his sentence has some other purpose. Even if the writer is trying to convey a belief, the way he does it, the style of his writing, may be at least of equal importance to him. In that case the role of metaphor is more to stimulate imagination than to convey truth—as far as expressing the statement is concerned, the job might be done equally well by a non-metaphorical sentence. But the use of metaphor may enable the speaker to get his message home to the hearer, who might pay no attention to some dry sentence containing words used in literal senses.¹⁸

¹⁸ Fogelin (*Figuratively Speaking*) points out that metaphors may vary along two dimensions—that of incongruity, and that of richness of comparison. If incongruity dominates, we have metaphors of wit, initially puzzling and when we see them, striking but often far-fetched. These are of less value, perhaps, for conveying information than metaphors which can be developed into a rich system of comparisons.

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE

So, then, humans often have available for transmitting a statement words with various literal senses, and sentence forms into which words can be put together, which make sentences which express those statements. And if speaker and hearer both have available to them words with the requisite senses, senses as clear and as precise as the speaker needs to transmit his message, the use of sentences employing such words written or spoken is the obvious way to transmit the statement; it is the way made for the job. But the words which humans have most readily available to them are words whose meaning is learnt from their primary use in connection with fairly down-to-earth human activities. Such words may not be immediately suitable for talk about abstract philosophical concepts, subatomic entities, infinite space and time, or God. They may need to have their meanings stretched, and to be used in odd ways, if they are to be used for talk about such fundamental matters.

However, humans have thought about deep matters for many millennia, and in sophisticated societies they have developed some vocabulary appropriate for this purpose. Mundane words have been given analogical senses, which continued use has made clear and precise. The analogical senses in which the premiss 'carries' the 'weight' of the argument, a student is 'bright', or time is 'composed of' many periods of time, are fairly clear and precise senses. If there is not available such an analogical sense, a statement may be expressed by a sentence using language metaphorically. But metaphors, as we have seen, have very vague meanings, and to make new precise statements with deep meanings, we may need to introduce new words, or give new senses to old words. One way to do this is to use a word in a metaphorical sense and then let that metaphorical sense become established, become a dead metaphor. The word becomes used with a metaphorical sense in contexts similar to those of the original use, and then speakers begin to explain that sense to other language users and illustrate by example when it would and when it would not be correct to use the word in this sense. Thereby they implicitly lay down the semantic and syntactic criteria for its use in this sense; and continued use in different contexts can lead, via a growing understanding of the correct use of the word in the new sense, to that sense becoming a precise sense. The alternative way to introduce a new

word or an old word with a new sense is explicitly, by giving examples of its correct application and/or defining its relations to other words.

When words which have a sense in the language are combined into a well-formed declarative sentence, and the context gives its referring terms a reference, then, by the argument of Chapter 1, that sentence will express a statement and in that sense have a meaning. But note again that it may not have one clear unambiguous meaning. Sometimes it will be indeterminate which of two or more meanings the sentence has—though that will become less likely in so far as more context comes in to disambiguate.

4

Genre

To convey information of any detail and complexity, we need to use many sentences, to make a lengthy speech or (if the information is to have any permanence) write a work of some length. Written works fall into different genres. Genres differ from each other in many respects, of which I draw attention to three.¹ They differ first in their subject-matter. The work may be about history or philosophy, or simply tell a story. Secondly they differ in style. They may be written in prose or poetry; and there are different forms of each. There are novels and short stories and prose poems. There are sonnets and limericks and trochaic hendecasyllables. And thirdly, genres differ in the amount of metaphor, the kinds of background knowledge, and the conventions of reference which they use. Works of certain genres are expected to use many words in metaphorical senses, whereas the expectation for other genres is that this is not so. The expectation is that most genres of poetry available today will use a lot of metaphor, whereas works of history or science fiction are expected to use very little. There are genres with their own conventions for referring to individuals. (Pastoral poetry had a stock of names for referring to individuals who were known outside the genre by quite different names.²) Some genres are distinguished by the kinds of literature they take for granted as known; and works make their points by the way they diverge from paradigm examples of the genre. Many a Greek tragedy concerned the same series of events as many another (e.g. the Oedipus story, or the fall of Troy). The message of the work is carried by the way it diverges from its predecessors. The common theme simply forms a framework in which to express this message.

¹ Alistair Fowler (*Kinds of Literature* (Clarendon Press, 1982), 60–74) finds at least fifteen different features which form bases for classifying works of literature into genres. He points out that a work may belong to more than one genre. Fowler's illuminating work is concerned only with literary genres.

² Ibid. 79.

Arising out of these differences is a central difference that genres differ in respect of whether or not the individual sentences of works of the genre have a truth-value—that is, are either true or false—or a truth-value which is relevant to the truth-value of the whole work. In the three previous chapters I analysed the criteria for the truth of individual sentences, and—in order not to complicate the discussion at that stage—I made the tacit assumption that speakers and writers convey their messages by means of separate sentences (even though a larger context is often necessary to detect what those sentences mean). But when we use many sentences to put forward a claim, the unit of communication is not the individual sentence, but rather the whole work. In most of our speeches and in most written works of non-literary genres (e.g., works of history, philosophy, or physics), this makes no difference, because the message of the work is the conjunction of the statements expressed by the individual sentences. The whole work is completely true if and only if each constituent declarative (unquoted) sentence is true; to the extent to which it contains false sentences, it is not completely true. (If a sentence is quoted, its truth-value is of course irrelevant to the truth-value of the whole. What is relevant is whether the speaker (writer) said to have uttered (written) that sentence did so.) However, some sentences matter a lot more than others. There is often a main point or points of works of history, philosophy, physics, or whatever; and the work is said to be ‘in essence’ or ‘fundamentally’ true if that point or those points are true, even if the work contains false sentences. All the same, while assessable as ‘basically’ ‘true’ or ‘false’, such works are often more naturally assessed, with respect to their truth-content, by a range of adjectives such as ‘insightful’, ‘illuminating’, ‘comprehensive’, and ‘accurate’, or as ‘shallow’, ‘superficial’, ‘flawed’, and ‘biased’. Yet it is not out of place to assess the main message as ‘true’ or ‘false’; and even occasionally as ‘completely true’ or ‘totally false’.

By contrast, in a work of fiction, such as a novel or a short story, and in many (but not all) kinds of poetry, most of the sentences do not have a truth-value. The major reason for this is that the referring terms do not, and (unlike the cases considered in Ch. 2) are not supposed to, pick out anything in the real world; so the sentences express propositions but not statements. There never was a Mr Pickwick, and so sentences purporting to be about him are neither true nor false. Even if some sentences in such a work do have a truth-value (as when a novel, intended as basically a work of fiction, includes some sentences about a person who actually lived), their truth-value is not relevant to the truth-value of the whole.

In general it is not appropriate to call the whole work of fiction or poetry true or false; it is merely deep or insightful, trivial or misleading. But there are cases where the work has a clear overall message, and here there is a place, even if not a very natural one, for assessing the work as 'true' or 'false'. The whole work makes a statement; it is true if that statement is true, false if it is not. And in this case the truth-value of the whole work is not a function of the truth-values of its individual sentences (as is the message of a work of history, more nearly completely true, the more true sentences it contains). Its overall statement might be true, even if most of its sentences do not have a truth-value and those which do have a truth-value are false. And when the unit of communication is the whole work, it is whether this is true that determines whether what the speaker or writer is telling us is true, and so whether he is being honest with us. I shall use 'true' and 'false' of such works in the way just described, for the reason that I shall want to consider in Chapter 10 the traditional claim that 'everything' written in the Bible is 'true'. But, as I shall point out in that chapter, the Bible contains many parables and poems, and it is only if we have a wide understanding of what it is for works of such genres to be true, that we can understand this claim in the sense intended.

Then parables or poems commending some sort conduct as heroic, or bemoaning a situation as bad, or depicting a situation as typical, may be described as true if that conduct is indeed heroic (even if the hero described as doing the actions never existed), or the situation is bad or typical (even if the particular one described never occurred).³ One very simple example which brings this out is worth quoting in full—Leigh Hunt's poem, 'Abou Ben Adhem':

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
 Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
 And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
 Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
 An angel writing in a book of gold:—
 Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
 And to the presence in the room he said,
 'What writest thou?'—The vision rais'd its head,
 And with a look made of all sweet accord,
 Answer'd, 'The names of those who love the Lord.'

³ For similar points, see R. W. Hepburn, *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh University Press, 1984), ch. 3: 'Poetry and "Concrete Imagination": Problems of Truth and Illusion'.

‘And is mine one?’ said Abou. ‘Nay, not so,’
 Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
 But cheerly still; and said, ‘I pray thee, then,
 Write me as one that loves his fellow men’.

The angel wrote, and vanish’d. The next night
 It came again with a great wakening light,
 And show’d the names whom love of God had blest,
 And lo! Ben Adhem’s name led all the rest.

The message is evident: love of one’s fellow-men matters greatly; God loves much those who love their fellow-men. Put like that, of course, the message sounds banal. Hence the need to put it in poetic form to make it come alive. The truth of the poem will consist in its basic message being a true one. Its truth does not have anything to do with whether or not there was really a man called ‘Abou Ben Adhem’, whether he really awoke one night and saw an angel, and so on. I have, alas, no general theory as to how to pick out the message of a work of literature in such a way as to assess it for truth;⁴ but clearly some works do have such a message.

We need to know to which genre a literary work belongs in order to be able to assess its truth-value or the truth-value of any sentence within it. And if the genre is unfamiliar, we cannot do this. Just as the context of the sentence is crucial for understanding the sense of a word, so the context of (a speech or) a literary work is crucial for understanding the meaning of a sentence. And conventions of the genre determine how that context affects the meaning of a sentence. Thus if ‘Larry is an elephant’ occurs in a children’s story, it has no truth-value. If it occurs in a guidebook to the London Zoo, it does, and is to be taken literally; the genre rules out the possibility of metaphor. But if it occurs in a poem, metaphorical meaning is always a serious possibility, to be adopted if a literal meaning is in any way unlikely. The context of the society in which the work is written determines the available kinds of genre. Familiarity with that context will help to show us which statements (if any) the sentences of that work express. Genre is not a restriction on an author. Rather, it provides him with a set of conventions, all ready to use, to express his message.

⁴ J. R. Searle (‘The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse’, repr. in P. A. French *et al.* (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (University of Minnesota Press, 1979)), comments on the lack of a general theory of this matter. See his p. 242. See this article generally on the differences between genres.

So in order to understand the teaching contained in a holy book or a doctrinal definition, we need to recognize the genre of the work containing it. This teaching may of course be conveyed in ways obvious to us, by a simple historical narrative or a metaphysical claim of a kind which might be found in a work of philosophy. But ancient cultures had also less obvious ways of conveying truth. So I need at this stage to distinguish five other genres, in order to have a system of classification ready to analyse different theological works.

MODELS

The first is the genre of describing some underlying essence in terms of a familiar but inadequate model. The obvious examples of the use of models are to be found in the prose parts of 'popular' books of physics or chemistry, when the author explains to us by means of models the nature of the reality which lies behind our observations—the composition of the atom, the nature of light, the structure of space. Models in the sense which I shall elucidate are systems of comparison. I still find the account given in Mary Hesse's *Models and Analogies in Science*⁵ by far the most satisfactory account of scientific models, and I shall simply describe this. Some familiar observable system is found to bear certain similarities to a process under investigation. Let us call the former 'the model' and the latter 'the process'. There are certain properties found to belong to both the model and the process—we call these the 'positive analogy'; others are found to be possessed by the model and not by the process—we call these the 'negative analogy'. There are further properties possessed by the model, such that we do not know whether or not the process possesses these; we call these the 'neutral analogy'. If there are a considerable number of 'positive analogies', that gives reason for supposing that the properties of the 'neutral analogy' are in fact possessed by the process, and the model proves fruitful to the extent to which they are. Thus water waves exhibit properties of diffraction, interference, and reflection. So too do sound and light. These constitute the positive analogy of sound and light waves to water waves. Also like water waves, sound is produced by motion of a source (a stick vibrated in a pond, vibration of a string or a gong). Sound,

⁵ Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Sheed & Ward, 1963).

like water, is transmitted by a medium—air—whereas light (despite initial hypotheses to the contrary) is not. All this suggests that we shall find analogies for elements in the wave equation $y = a \sin 2\pi(\frac{x}{\lambda} - ft)$ applying to water (y is height or amplitude of the water at a point x measured horizontally; a is the maximum amplitude of waves; λ is the wavelength, the distance between two maximum amplitudes; f is their frequency, the number of waves passing an observer in unit time; and t the time elapsed since an initial instant) in a similar equation for sound and light, and these we find. The same equation applies to the propagation of sound and light if we read the amplitude as loudness for sound and brightness for light (these being the properties of ‘more of’ the process at a place, as it were), frequency as pitch or hue (the varied quality of the process, produced by increasing the speed of its production), and wavelength as the velocity of propagation divided by the frequency.

Perhaps the normal sense of something being a wave is that it propagates as a vertical disturbance in an observable medium (i.e. as a ripple). In that case, of the three, only water waves are really waves. For sound waves are not observable, and their disturbance is in the direction of propagation, and the disturbance of light rays is in all directions perpendicular to the direction of propagation and not in a medium. Sound waves and light waves are waves only in a sense analogical with the former sense. In this new analogical sense something is a wave if and only if it propagates in accordance with the wave equation—in which case water waves, sound waves, and light waves are all waves. The scientist uses the word in this new sense in order to tell us that there is an analogy in the world between water, on the one hand, and sound and light, on the other hand, in the way in which disturbances are propagated, so that their propagations are all waves in the new sense which is analogous to the narrow sense in which only the propagation of a water disturbance is a wave.

Sometimes we need more than one model in order to describe some process, where each model makes a quite different comparison from the other, and they cannot naturally be fitted together—in that if you take the words used in expounding each model in their literal senses, you would contradict yourself by affirming both to be true. The two models can only be coaffirmed if you take the words of each model in new analogical senses, and then just what the analogical senses amount to may be considerably vaguer than if we had only one model. The sense of each analogical word is fixed partly by the need for compatibility with

the other analogical sense. What the extent of the comparison amounts to is fixed by the other semantic and syntactic rules which govern the use of the words involved.

It turned out that we need a second model to describe the nature of light. The reasons given above for claiming that light is a wave only in an analogical sense were ones familiar to nineteenth-century physicists; but twentieth-century physicists had to say that it is a wave only in a far more extended analogical sense, because they discovered that in certain respects light is particulate (behaves as if it consists of individual particles, photons). For example, a beam of very faint light interacts with individual molecules on an intercepting screen instead of spreading itself very thinly all over the screen, and it exchanges energy in the way to be expected if it consisted of a stream of particles with certain energies and momenta (the photoelectric effect, and the Compton effect). But in normal senses, or even in the analogical sense of 'wave' described above, light cannot both be a wave and consist of particles. A particle is a small chunk of something material or quasi-material which passes through space. A 'wave', as we have seen, is a disturbance which spreads out over space in accordance with the wave equation—in a way that a particle could not. A wave leaving a point spreads over a three-dimensional volume of space around the point, whereas a particle can only pass along a narrow path through that space. Physicists have observed phenomena most plausibly explained by supposing that light is a wave, and other phenomena most plausibly explained by supposing that it consists of streams of photons. So they must, if they are to say what light really is, and not merely describe and predict phenomena, say that it is something both wave-like and particle-like, that is in new and much stretched analogical senses of 'wave' and 'particle' both a wave and particles. This is not a once-off metaphor. The words in these new senses can now be applied not merely to light but to all electromagnetic radiation and to all beams of fundamental particles. Once we are clear that the words (e.g. 'wave' and 'particle') are being used analogically, and in so far as it is clear what is the extent of the analogy (the extent of the comparisons to water waves, and to paradigm examples of particles), it is appropriate to assess the prose parts of popular physics books which use the model (e.g. describe light as a wave) for truth or falsity. A general claim that the model applies—for example, that light is a wave of a certain kind—is true if and only if there is a significant analogy of the kind stated. A claim using the model—for example, the claim that a particular beam of light is a wave with such-and-such a wavelength—is

true if and only if both there is the overall analogy and what is said by applying it—for example, that the light has the specified wavelength, is true. A whole paragraph using words in such analogical senses is completely true if and only if all its sentences are true.⁶

ALLEGORIES

Somewhat similar to the genre of model is that of allegory. The basic idea of an allegory is of a fictional story in which the persons or things ‘correspond’ to persons or things claimed to be real, and their relations and properties (including actions) ‘correspond’ to those of the real persons or things. A simple and obvious modern example of an allegory is George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, first published in 1945. This is the story of a farm whose animals, inspired by the socialist teaching of a pig called Major, expel the human farmer Mr Jones. Major dies before the revolution which is led by two pigs, Snowball and Napoleon. Napoleon, however, eventually drives out Snowball and establishes a tyrannical rule. The farm clearly corresponds to Russia, which became the Soviet Union for much of the last century. Major is Marx. Snowball is Trotsky, and Napoleon is Stalin. The correspondences of words and actions of the fictional characters to the real historical figures and groups thereof who dominated the history of the Soviet Union are very detailed and very obvious to many readers of 1945. The correspondences are not total—for example, there is no animal corresponding to Lenin—but so many of the details are similar that it remains very obvious what corresponds to what. An older example of an allegory is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. This is the story of a pilgrim named ‘Christian’ journeying to ‘the Heavenly City’, and this journey clearly corresponds to what Bunyan claims to be the gradual formation of a typical Christian’s character by doing actions so as to make him fitted for Heaven. There are obstacles and diversions making the journey a difficult one, and these (in view of the similarities between physical obstacles on a path and temptations making it difficult for someone to

⁶ When such a two-model claim is spelled out, it becomes an issue whether what is being claimed is coherent. My concern now, however, is simply to explain how models function in conveying meaning, not whether the claim conveyed is coherent. For fuller discussion of the two-model situation of Quantum Theory, see my *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. edn. (Clarendon Press, 1993), ch. 4; and for discussion of how the coherence or incoherence of claims can be shown, see *ibid.* chs. 2 and 3.

pursue a goal with constancy) correspond to the temptations which beset the Christian in his life. Thus, after beginning his journey, Christian comes to a mire, 'The Slow of Dispond' through which he must pass. Struggling in the mire at the beginning of his journey corresponds to the situation of the sinner when 'awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions'.⁷ For the first part of his journey Christian has to bear on his back a heavy burden, of which he cannot rid himself, but which falls from his back when he comes to a cross. The guilt of our sin is thus compared to a burden of which we cannot rid ourselves. Christ rids us through his Passion. And so on. The comparisons are so well worn as to be obvious.

In a scientific model, the comparison being made (e.g. of light to a water wave) is stated explicitly. That is sometimes also the case with allegories; but here it is more usual for the context to suggest—in accordance with the rules for metaphor elucidated earlier—which comparison is being made. The allegory is then a sustained metaphor. The longer an allegory, the easier it is to interpret. Clearly an allegory referring to two individuals and two of their interactions might be similar enough to various goings-on in the real world relevant to the context; but the more individuals referred to, and the more details provided of their interactions, the fewer will be the candidates for plausible comparisons. The individual sentences of an allegory using words metaphorically may be interpreted in many different ways. But only some of those interpretations, and perhaps only one, will give the sentences meanings in which they fit naturally together to form a poem or prose story making connected claims, relevant to the context of its production. Fogelin has analysed such a poem or prose story as a system of 'interacting metaphors', which 'establishes the level of specificity at which the metaphor is to be read'.⁸ In many prose allegories the system of comparisons is a neat one (e.g. each country in a war is compared to each person or animal in a story), but in poems any system of metaphors is often less clear-cut, in fact often too vague to deserve the name of 'allegory'.⁹

Once the context makes clear, of some of the individuals and their characteristics in the fictional allegory, to which supposed real-life

⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. R. Sharrock, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 1968), 15.

⁸ Robert J. Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (Yale University Press, 1988), 106–12.

⁹ For a brief history of allegory, see John MacQueen, *Allegory* (Methuen, 1970).

individuals and characteristics they correspond, further correspondences will be more obvious, and the comparisons being made then make claims (which can be assessed for truth-value) about the real-life situation. Then, as with a model, to the extent to which it is clear just what are the comparisons being made (e.g. that the situation of the sinner as described is like struggling in a mire), then—whether or not one can say that the individual sentences are true—the whole allegory is true if, by and large, the comparison holds.

The important difference between models and allegories is that when a model is used in science to describe some process, the process is far less accessible than the model. The items in the model are real-life items (waves such as water waves); and the model applies to the extent to which the comparison holds. We cannot observe individual bits of light on the small scale (individual photons); models enable us to get some grip on what light is like. In an allegory we may well be familiar with the real persons and things; the allegory is a fictional story if taken literally, but its truth depends on the adequacy of its applicability to the real-life situation. As I noted above, an individual sentence using a model of the form ‘This light wave has such-and-such a length’ can be assessed for truth or falsity, once the analogical sense of ‘wave’ has been clarified (as may be done by explicating its use in application to phenomena other than light). But an individual sentence of an allegory does not have a truth-value on its own, because without the other sentences of the allegory it would not have the meaning of telling us about the real-life situation (unless the writer tells us in detail which individuals and which properties in the allegory correspond to which real-world items, and then it will be the case that individual sentences can be assessed for truth or falsity). Normally only the whole allegory taken as a whole in a context (e.g. 1945) makes it the case that Major corresponds to Marx, and then it is only an overall comparison of the allegory with the real-life situation that is in place. It does not normally make a small piece of the allegory false if we learn about Lenin, and note that the allegory has no corresponding individual. But it seems appropriate to say that the allegory is true if and only if there is significant correspondence between the fictional individuals and the real-life ones. The fictional story may be simply a literary device to present information about the real persons and things in a new way; but it may also help us to see aspects of the real persons and things which we had not noticed before.

As I shall discuss in Chapter 10, biblical commentators of earlier centuries have often interpreted biblical passages allegorically, when they

were not originally so intended. In doing this, they followed in the steps of the commentators of classical and later Greece who interpreted the narrative poems of Homer allegorically. Thus Metrodorus of Lampsacus 'allegorized away the very existence of Homer's gods and goddesses. He said that Agamemnon was the *aether*, Achilles the Sun, Helen the earth, Paris the air, Demeter the liver, Dionysus the spleen, and Apollo the gall,'¹⁰ and so he read the *Iliad* as a scientific treatise! Biblical commentators, as we shall see in Chapter 10, were not as extreme in their allegorizing as that.

There is a distinction between allegory and typology, although not all writers make it in exactly the same way. I shall understand it as follows, and my way of understanding it is not greatly different from that of most writers.¹¹ An allegory is a text in which a purportedly true story is told about some individuals by means of a fictional story in which the different persons, things, properties, and relations 'correspond' to purported real persons, things, properties, and relations. The correspondences may be of various kinds (and not necessarily of person to person; persons may correspond to animals or plants). Typology involves recognizing a close similarity between actual persons, not just inanimate things, especially in respect of their actions (a similarity of person to person, and action to action), in aspects regarded as deeply important; the similarity, according to the author of the text, is not created by him, he is merely drawing our attention to it. An earlier event, the 'type', is seen as a prediction or prototype of a yet more important later event. The description of the earlier event in the relevant respects, however, provides a metaphorical description of the later event. The interpretation of Scripture sometimes involves typology. Thus to interpret Elisha feeding the 100 as a prophecy or prototype of Jesus Christ feeding the 5,000 is typological interpretation.¹² Elisha is seen as the type of Christ, who is viewed as the new Elisha. In such cases the later person—for instance, Christ—may even perform the act deliberately

¹⁰ See R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (SCM Press, 1959), 56.

¹¹ For example, Lampe defines what he regards as proper typology as the activity of seeking 'to discover and make explicit the correspondences in historical events which have been brought about by the recurring rhythm of the divine activity'; G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Reasonableness of Typology', in G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (SCM Press, 1957), 29. In my definition I have avoided any mention of the correspondence being sustained by God, although of course virtually all typological interpretation does attribute the correspondence to God's activity.

¹² See 2 Kgs. 4: 42–4, and Mark 6: 35–44. All my quotations from the Bible are taken from the translation in the New Revised Standard Version, unless stated otherwise.

in order to fulfil the prophecy, and thus declare himself (by a non-verbal action) to be the new such-and-such; though deliberate imitation is not necessary for the existence of a type. I shall also understand commands actually issued at an earlier time, which exhibit similarities of the above kinds to commands issued at a later time or to actions done at a later time, as 'types' of the latter. We shall examine instances of such types in Chapter 10. If the commands were merely recorded in a fictional story (written after the actual commands or events), they would constitute allegories of the latter.

MORAL FABLES

In both models and allegories a claim is being made by means of a comparison, in which different items on the one side (e.g. the allegory) can be aligned with different items on the other side (e.g. actual history), and one can sometimes assess separately the truth-value of individual parts of the model or allegory. I turn to consider two genres in which such alignment is not possible. These are both genres of what Plato called 'myth'. However, I shall not use this word for either of these genres, because in contemporary English, outside a fairly narrow body of theological (and other specialized academic) literature, a 'myth' is simply a false historical claim,¹³ and that is not what Plato was claiming about his 'myths' or what I wish to claim about my two genres. The first such genre, which I shall call 'moral fable', is the genre of a short fictional story, the point of which is to commend (or discommend) a certain kind of attitude or conduct. As with instances of the other genres considered so far, it is more natural to assess moral fables (in respect of their content) by adjectives other than 'true' and 'false'—for example, as 'inspiring' or 'insightful', 'misguided', 'superficial' or 'perverse'. But the adjectives 'true' and 'false' are not entirely out of place; and if they are used, the criteria for their use are clear. A moral fable is true if the conduct commended is good (or the conduct discommended is bad);

¹³ Hence the immediate reaction of outrage to the publication of John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, 1977), in which various eminent theologians wrote about the 'myth' that Jesus was God Incarnate. This title was not intended to indicate that the message of the volume was that this central Christian doctrine was false, but something purportedly a little more subtle than that. For the history of the use of the term 'myth' in theology over the past two centuries, see Maurice Wiles, 'Myth in Theology,' in *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

false if the conduct commended is bad (or the conduct discommended is good).

One obvious example of a moral fable is the story told by the prophet Nathan to King David. The context in which Nathan told the story was that David had had sexual intercourse with the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who then became pregnant; so David ensured that Uriah was killed in battle in order to be able to marry her. Nathan then came to David and told him this story:

There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.¹⁴

Then David became very angry about the rich man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' And then Nathan said, 'You are the man!'. The point of the story was to discommend the wicked kind of conduct which David had pursued.

Nathan was not making a claim for the historical truth of his story; that was irrelevant. The context (of David's behaviour and his conversation with Nathan) implies a moral claim about conduct similar to that described in the story—that it was wicked. If that claim is true, then in the sense described earlier the story is true. Plato, unlike the average Greek of his day, considered the traditional stories about the Greek gods and heroes to be largely false if considered as history. Many of them, he held, should not be taught because they represented gods and heroes (superior beings) as behaving badly, and so provided a bad example for children and others who heard the stories. One such story, Plato claimed, was the story of Cronos mutilating his father Uranus; this would lead children to regard patricide as permissible. But there were some stories which represented gods and heroes behaving well, and these should be told. The educators in the ideal state advocated by Plato would be telling these stories to children simply as inspiring

¹⁴ 2 Sam. 12: 1–5.

fiction—that is, as moral fables. In this state, ‘first we tell children stories; they are, taken as a whole false but in part true’.¹⁵ By the criteria I have suggested, some such stories regarded as moral fables will be true, and others will be false. ‘Abou Ben Adhem’ is in part a moral fable, because by means of a fictional story it is commending a certain kind of attitude—love of one’s fellow-men. But it is not a pure moral fable, because it tells us that God loves that attitude. A fictional story which commends an attitude or conduct partly on the grounds of the attitude of God or gods or something supernatural towards such an attitude or behaviour we may call a religious moral fable. It is true if and only if God (or whatever) does have that attitude, and the conduct is good.

METAPHYSICAL FABLES

And then there are what I shall call ‘metaphysical fables’. While, as we have seen, Plato called moral fables ‘myths’, he also used the term ‘myth’ to designate a story (normally fictional) intended to be understood metaphorically which tells us something of great metaphysical or epistemological importance about the human condition or the nature of all things; and such stories are what I call metaphysical fables.

Many ancient societies, including that of the Greeks, had creation stories, stories about how the world began and about how humans lost their innocence, stories about how the world is currently kept in being, and stories about what will happen at the end of time. These stories were often re-enacted, made present to the community by liturgical acts. They were thought of as describing events happening in a time before or after ordinary time, or in a real world which explains the actual world. It is unclear to me just how literally the average member of a sophisticated ancient society took these stories. While most Greeks, for example, thought that in some sense there was a Zeus or a Poseidon, it is unclear to me whether very many Greeks supposed any of the stories about Zeus or Poseidon to be true in their historical details. Indeed, I think this unlikely, because different stories contradicted each other, and the details of the stories made little difference to the way those who heard them lived their lives—they worshipped Zeus, but it made no difference to the way

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic* 377a.

they worshipped him whom they believed his parents to be or how he acquired his throne.

It may be that many ancient makers and hearers of such stories were trying to express and grasp something deep about the human condition which they could express and grasp only by a story about gods and heroes. This was the view of the eighteenth-century German classicist Christian Heyne who held that stories of gods and heroes provided 'the only adequate way' for ancient peoples 'to express a meaningful statement about the world';¹⁶ and in the same spirit Schelling saw these stories 'as embodying a truth which is not just religious, but instead general'.¹⁷ But Plato is the first known thinker to claim that these stories which, as I noted, he called 'myths' did sometimes have this role. He did not merely disbelieve minor historical details of the stories, but sometimes gave a fundamentally metaphorical interpretation to the stories which totally changed their meaning. Having this metaphorical meaning is what on my definition makes an apparently historical story into a metaphysical fable.

While Plato countenances the use without alteration of some traditional stories about the gods or heroes as 'myths' in the 'moral fable' sense, most of the stories which he called 'myths' were either traditional ones which he altered significantly or ones which he invented himself. While he seems to allow that some of the traditional stories contained a vestige of historical truth, he was not making that claim for the stories which he invented—and clearly not for his most famous 'myth', the 'myth' of the cave. He claims that this 'myth' provides an analogy for the human condition.¹⁸ Some prisoners live in a cave tied up so that they can see only the wall of the cave furthest from the outside world. Behind them are people carrying artefacts (statues made of wood or stone or other materials) and talking as they walk; and behind these is a fire. The fire projects on to the wall of the cave shadows of the artefacts, but not shadows of the people carrying them. The prisoners attribute the sounds of the people talking to the shadows, and think of the shadows as real objects. Similarly, claims Plato, ordinary people suffer from deep illusions about the nature of reality. Education involves releasing people

¹⁶ See Glenn W. Most, 'From Logos to Muthos', in R. Buxton (ed.), *From Myth to Reason?* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 38.

¹⁷ Ibid. 43.

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic* 514a. He writes there that he has provided a comparison (ἀπείκασον) for the human condition, and later (517a) that this story of the cave is an image (εἰκών) of that condition.

from these illusions; and this, as further details of the ‘myth’ illustrate, can be a painful business. The ‘myth’ of the cave is a metaphysical fable in my sense.

So too is the ‘myth’ related by Protagoras in *Protagoras* about the origin of virtue. This is expounded within the framework of gods giving gifts to humans. In Protagoras’s story Zeus originally endowed humans with various physical powers such as swiftness of foot, and later gave them fire and technical skill. But these were insufficient for humans to defend themselves against the wild beasts—for that they needed ‘justice and conscience’. So Zeus sent Hermes to distribute that gift. Hermes asked Zeus how he should distribute the gift—to certain experts, or so all. ‘To all’, said Zeus, ‘and let all share in them.’¹⁹ Clearly Zeus and Hermes are irrelevant to the message of the ‘myth’. They represent metaphorically whatever are the causes of our abilities. The point of the ‘myth’ was that virtue was a late arrival in human culture, available to all, and necessary for human survival. The ‘myth’ claims that, like carpentry, virtue is something that can be taught; but, unlike carpentry, it should be taught to all—there need be no specialists in virtue to whom the non-expert can turn.

And, as a final example of a metaphysical fable, I take a ‘myth’ in which Plato thought that there was some historical (future factual) element, but where the details were irrelevant to the point of the ‘myth’. In *Phaedo* Socrates describes in some detail the geography of the other world to which human souls depart at death and in which they are allocated different fates. He goes on: ‘Now to insist that those things are just as I’ve related them would not be fitting for a man of intelligence; but that either that or something like it is true ... That is fitting—so one should repeat such things to oneself like a spell; which is just why I’ve prolonged the tale.’²⁰ He implies here that there is a core historical element, that someone or something will determine our fate after death partly in virtue of the way we have lived on earth; but it is irrelevant whether the gods or something else allocate the fates, or whether the geography of the other world, and so the places available for those who have lived different kinds of lives (Acheron, Tartarus, Cocytus), are at all similar to those described in the ‘myth’.

¹⁹ Plato, *Protagoras* 322d.

²⁰ Plato, *Phaedo* 114d, trans. in Catalin Partenie (ed.), *Plato: Selected Myth* (Oxford University Press, 2004), to whose Introduction about Plato’s views on myth I am much indebted.

Clearly again these 'myths' can be assessed for truth or falsity by the criteria that their metaphysical or epistemological message (about what the real world beyond our present experience is like and what we can know about it) is true or false—even if other adjectives are somewhat more appropriate for assessing it.

HISTORICAL FABLES

And finally I need to mention briefly a genre which I shall call the genre of historical fables. These may be in various styles—historical novels, historical poems, or historical dramas. These are works which purport to describe the essence or broad outline of some piece of history, while filling it out with details which purport to have little historical foundation. The historical details may not be known, and so the author imagines details consonant with what he believes to be the essence of what happened; or, while some actual details are known, recounting them would not—in the author's view—bring true events to life in the way that certain invented details would do. Many plays and films have this character, and among them many recent British television 'docudramas'. We know the outlines of the last days of Hitler, or of the lives of Queen Elizabeth the First or Sir Thomas More, but we do not always know exactly who went where when, or who said exactly what to whom. We may also be uncertain about the motives of those involved. The historical film fills out the outline with a fictional account of the details which purports to bring out the motives of those involved. It includes, for example, conversations which probably never took place, in order to show what the participants sought to achieve and their attitude to each other. Such a film often begins with a statement stating that it was 'based on actual events', and it may add that some of the details have been changed. It seems appropriate to say that the film gives a true account of the events, if the outline is correct and so is the claim about motives; and that the details by which all this is brought to life are irrelevant. As well as historical dramas, there are many historical novels or poems of this kind.

I have now explicated the rules for ascribing truth-values to genres of five different kinds. We can find examples of genres of all these kinds in modern secular literature, and—we shall see in due course—also among writing which purports to convey revealed truth. Among such

religious writing we shall, however, find, as well as examples of these five genres, also examples of genres which are not to be found in modern secular writing.

DOUBLE MEANING

There are works which have two distinct meanings—they may be, for example, narratives (in prose or verse) which are both historical fables and yet also allegories or metaphysical fables about something other than their historical subject (e.g. the spiritual state of man). It is not easy to find crystal-clear cases where the author has both a clear historical message and (by means of the same sentences interpreted differently) a clear non-historical message, from periods and kinds of literature far from the biblical, but narrative poetry can provide examples not too different from the clear biblical examples. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* tells the story of King Arthur. He derived the framework of his narrative from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, which some (including perhaps Tennyson) supposed to contain a historical core. But also, as J. T. Knowles wrote:

King Arthur, as he has always been treated by Mr Tennyson, stands obviously for no mere individual prince or hero, but for the 'King within us'—our highest nature, by whatsoever name it may be called—conscience; spirit; the moral soul; the religious sense; the noble resolve. His story and adventures become the story of the battle and preeminence of the soul and of the perpetual warfare between the spirit and the flesh.²¹

Why should we accept this interpretation? First, it is a general rule that poetry often contains a 'deeper meaning' than the surface one. Secondly, legend pictured Arthur as a perfect man. As Knowles goes on to write: 'For so exalting him there is almost abundant warrant in the language of many old compilers, by whom "all human perfection was collected in Arthur".'

Thirdly, a perfect man is a fairly unlikely occurrence, and so are quite a number of other things in *Idylls*; and so the story suggests looking for another interpretation, though Tennyson's attempt to be faithful to Malory suggests that that is not the only meaning. The forming and

²¹ J. T. Knowles, letter to the *Spectator*, 1 Jan. 1870, repr. in J. J. Jump, (ed.), *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 312–17.

the triumph of conscience amid adversity was a very Victorian idea. As Knowles went on to say:

Nothing is more remarkable than the way in which so much symbolic truth is given without the slightest forcing of the narrative itself. Indeed, so subtle are the touches and so consummately refined the art employed, that quite possibly many readers may hold there is no parable at all intended.

And fourthly, this letter of Knowles from which I have been quoting elicited from Tennyson a letter to Knowles praising his interpretation as 'the best, and indeed ... the only true critique of the *Idylls*'.²² Though he later emphasized that there was no exact 'spiritual equivalent' for each person or place mentioned, he still claimed that 'there is an allegorical or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem'. Yet 'I hate to be tied down to say "this means that", because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation'.²³ In my terminology, *Idylls* is a metaphysical fable, and not an allegory, and also a historical fable.

So, on the assumption that the attempt to be faithful to Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* indicates a historical fable, the conventions of the genre (poetry) together with publicly available traditions, symbolic conventions, and unlikely incidents described in the text, backed up in this case by the author's affirmation, indicate that *Idylls* is also a metaphysical fable. Although, since meaning is a public matter, an author cannot declare his sentences to have a meaning of which they are not susceptible, his later interpretation can choose among initially possible interpretations, and that interpretation together with the original can determine the correct meaning. This is because among the criteria for determining meaning is consonance with other publicly affirmed beliefs of the author. *Idylls of the King* has a double meaning. A work with a double meaning will have two truth-values, one for each of the messages it is giving us.

INSERTION INTO A NEW CONTEXT

One piece of writing or speech may be repeated in a new context. Its meaning may be changed radically by this move. A speech may

²² Quoted, *ibid.* 11.

²³ Quoted in C. Ricks (ed.), *The Poems of Tennyson*, iii, 2nd edn. (Longman, 1987), 258.

be delivered or a letter sent to a new audience. The speaker or writer tells 'you' that 'you' are mistaken in various ways and ought to do this or that or have failed in various ways. When received by a new audience, the 'you' being different, the statements (though not the propositions) made by the sentences are now different. Or a speech, letter, or other chunk of writing may be taken over by another person. He may make the same speech, in the sense of one with the same type sentences; or he may put his signature on the same type letter. Then the 'I' refers to a different person. Or he may quote a piece of poetry written by someone else in a different situation to make a claim about the meaning of a new situation of himself or his audience. In the dark days of the Second World War Churchill quoted A. H. Clough's poem beginning:

Say not the struggle nought availeth,
The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not nor faileth,
And as things have been, they remain.

and ending

But, westward look, the land is bright.

He did not mean by his use of this poem what Clough originally meant, but he was urging his hearers not to think of the British situation in the war in the way described in the first verse. Part of the reason why we should not think in that way, he is saying, is that there is reason for hope from the West, meaning by that the United States of America, to help Britain conquer the Nazis.

Of particular relevance to a later chapter is the difference made where one written work is inserted into a larger work. I draw attention to three ways in which an insertion can make a radical difference to the meaning of a text. First, speeches and documents may be quoted verbatim. The original production of the speech expressed certain views; its quotation merely claims that those words were uttered. Secondly, a preface or appendix may be added in which explicitly or by implication the author states that he no longer affirms some of the contents, or that he wishes them to be understood in some unusual way. The most familiar modern example of this is where one author puts a number of his previously published papers together under one cover, and adds a preface explaining that while he republishes the papers in the form in which they were originally published, he now wishes some of them

to be understood with certain qualifications; or, more radically, that he does not now agree with the argument of some of the earlier ones but republishes them in order to show what is wrong with them. In such a context the author is not expressing the views contained in the papers, but rather quoting them; and the meaning of the whole is what the author says it is in the preface, with the qualifications which he makes there—even if that was not the meaning of the papers as originally published. For an example of a preface which changed the whole meaning of a work, albeit covertly, consider Osiander's preface to Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*, saying that this detailed work, which asserted that the Earth revolved annually around the sun, was to be read not as claiming that the Earth did revolve around the sun but simply as saying that this assumption was useful for making detailed calculations of planetary positions. The meaning of the work with the preface was now very different from its meaning without it. And thirdly a footnote may correct something in the text, saying that it is to be understood in some unusual way.

THREE KINDS OF CONTEXT

One thing which should be very clear, as a result of the discussions of the last four chapters, is the very large role played by the context of utterance or inscription in determining the meaning of a token sentence—that is, which statement is expressed by the token sentence. Let me summarize the various ways in which context determines meaning, distinguishing between the immediate context of the surrounding sentences (which I shall call the 'literary context'), the authorship and intended audience (which I shall call the 'social context'), and the context of the wider culture within which the sentence appears (which I shall call the 'cultural context'). The literary context removes ambiguities in the senses of words, and helps to determine the genre to which the sentence belongs—in showing whether 'Larry is an elephant' comes from a zoo guide or a children's story, the literary context helps to show whether it is supposed to have a truth-value on its own. (I write 'helps to show', for the wider cultural context is also necessary; this determines which genres there are and the rules for different genres for how and whether the truth-value of the whole work is a function of the truth-value of its individual sentences.) The social context determines the reference of referring expressions. Who wrote the sentence to

whom, when, and where, determines the reference of 'I', 'you', 'now', 'here', and other indexical expressions. It also determines the reference of proper names. Which 'John' or 'Aristotle' is being referred to is a function of how speaker and hearer usually use these names (and the literary context may disambiguate if they use them in more than one way). Social context, in the form of knowledge of the author's beliefs and those of his intended audience, also helps to determine which sentences are to be understood literally and which are to be understood metaphorically. Finally, social context determines the standard of accuracy relevant to determining the truth of a sentence. As I have noted, the cultural context of literary practice helps to determine the genre of the work to which a sentence belongs. Knowledge of the genre of a work is a further help (when we are ignorant of the beliefs of the author and his intended audience) in distinguishing literal sentences from metaphorical ones. Cultural context also crucially determines how the distinction between statement and presupposition is to be made.

I wrote above that 'knowledge of an author's beliefs and those of his intended audience... helps to determine which sentences are to be understood... metaphorically'. If he says something obviously (to himself and his audience) false or irrelevant if taken literally, we should understand what he says figuratively, and that often means metaphorically. But of course not all of an audience may have the same beliefs about what is false. In that case I suggest that our conventions are such that if an author says something false, and obviously so both to himself and to many of his intended audience, that suffices to force a metaphorical meaning on the passage; clearly, not everyone can understand everything that is said to them. Sometimes the intended audience may fail to understand what is being said because they lack any beliefs about the field which will enable them to recognize the falsity (or irrelevance) of what is being said. The obviousness of the falsity (or irrelevance) must be understood as its obviousness to those who have some familiarity with the field. Poems are not always understood by those who read them, and that is because they lack a certain background of belief which the author has which makes possible the recognition of metaphor. A poet may write a poem about distant islands, which may not be understood except by those who visit the islands and acquire enough true beliefs about them to share with the author a recognition of manifest falsity, which enables them to see which passages are to be taken metaphorically

and which literally, and to understand the metaphors involved. Fortunately poets sometimes help us by telling us where to find the background knowledge, or even by providing it for us. T. S. Eliot provided a series of notes on *The Waste Land* which he hoped would provide the knowledge which would enable his readers to understand the poem.

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PART II

EVIDENCE OF A REVELATION

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The Need for Revelation

Part I was concerned with the means by which a message can be communicated. We saw that a whole range of devices, from sentences using words in a literal sense, through sentences using words in a metaphorical sense, to symbolic acts, is available; and that how they are to be interpreted depends crucially on the context—by whom the message is sent, to whom, against what background of shared assumptions. We now proceed to the central question of how we could recognize a message from God.

REASONS TO EXPECT A REVELATION

As I emphasized in the Introduction, with all claims about particular occurrences which are to be expected on one world-view, but not on another, it is crucial to take into account the other evidence for that world-view. Reports of observations are rightly viewed very sceptically when the phenomena purportedly observed are ruled out by a well-established scientific theory. To take a different example from that used in the Introduction: if you have a well-established theory which says that the planets and stars are carried round the Earth on crystalline spheres, you will rightly discount reports of observers on just one particular occasion who claim to have observed a comet pass through the heavenly regions where the spheres are supposed to be (as opposed to the comet being a mere sublunary phenomenon). Conversely, if a theory leads you to expect that comets will move on elliptical paths around the sun (as Newton's theory led people to expect), you will have reason to believe some observational report by one solitary amateur observer of a comet being seen in a place where it would be seen if it was moving from its known previous position along such a path—when otherwise you might be right not to trust the report of a solitary amateur observer. So if there is other evidence which makes it quite likely that there is a

God, all-powerful and all-good, who made the Earth and its inhabitants, then—I shall be arguing—it becomes to some extent likely that he will become incarnate at some time in human history for certain purposes, and claims that he has done so require a lot less in the way of historical evidence than they would do otherwise.

I believe that there is significant evidence provided by very general features of the world and of human experience for the existence of God. I have argued elsewhere¹ that various public phenomena—the existence of the physical universe, its conformity to simple intelligible laws, those laws and the boundary conditions of the universe being such as to bring about human organisms, those human organisms being conscious (and so having souls), humans having moral awareness and the opportunity to mould themselves and each other for good or ill, and the fact that hundreds of thousands of humans have experiences apparently of the presence of God, make it (despite the occurrence of pain and other evil) quite probable—let's say 'as probable as not'—that there is a God. We may call this evidence the evidence of natural theology. I cannot repeat here the arguments from this evidence to the existence of God, the arguments of natural theology. But clearly, the stronger the arguments of natural theology for the existence of God, the more reason we have to expect a revelation from God, for only if there is a God can there be a revelation from God.

But even if there is a God, why should he reveal things to us, instead of allowing us to find them out for ourselves? The answer is that there are matters which it would be very good for us to know which are such that either we could not find them out for ourselves, or we have not previously proved persistent or honest enough with ourselves to do so.

There are matters of four kinds which we have not found out for ourselves and which it would be very good for us to know, and so ones which a good God might reveal to us. First, it would be good for us to know a lot more about God's nature than we do. A God who made rational creatures would want us to interact with him; and for that purpose we need to know who he is and what he has done for us. We need help from above, in order to understand the deepest reality. So a reason for God giving us a revelation about any matter at all is simply to provide more evidence of his existence. I have claimed that our natural reason can show that it is probable that there is a God.

¹ See my *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2004); and the shorter *Is There a God?* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

But not everyone is able to see this; and there seems to some people to be a strong argument against the existence of God from the fact of evil. We sometimes need help to see that these arguments from the general features of the world are cogent and that the argument from evil is not cogent. And even if we are clever enough to appreciate all this, we are subject to temptations which may lead us to hide from what reason shows. If some prophet claims to have a revelation from God and produces some evidence that his message does come from God, that increases the probability that there is a God. But God being the ultimate source of existence will clearly have aspects to his being which humans are not well equipped to discover for themselves; and in order that we should be able to interact better with God, it is good that we should know more about him. For example, if God is in a sense a community of loving persons—a Trinity—rather than a solitary individual, this is not something that humans proved able to work out for themselves before it became an item of Christian doctrine, which Christians believed on the ground that it had been revealed by God.² If we know about God that he is a Trinity, we will know him better and so be able to worship him more appropriately for what he is.

Secondly, if God made the world, it has proved to be (to some extent) a world of sin and suffering. I shall argue below that God has reason to deal with this by becoming incarnate (i.e. by taking a human way of thinking and acting (a human nature) and a human body), and thereby providing atonement for our sins and identifying with our suffering. If he has dealt with our sin and suffering in this way at a certain time in history, we need to know the historical details of when and where and how this happened, in order that his incarnation might serve its purposes.

When we have wronged someone by failing to fulfil our obligations to them, it is our duty (i.e. it is obligatory) to repent and apologize and also to make reparation—for example, to fulfil the obligations we have neglected, and to do a bit more for the person wronged as

² I believe that there are good a priori arguments in favour of the doctrine of the Trinity (i.e. arguments to show that if there is a God, he is triune)—see my *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), esp. ch. 8. But they are arguments of some sophistication and were not articulated until Richard of St Victor put them forward in the twelfth century; and he put them forward when the doctrine of the Trinity was already believed by Christians on the ground of it having been revealed. There is no evidence of any ordinary human having given an a priori argument for this doctrine before the doctrine was in the public arena, available for proof or disproof. And even when it was in the public arena, Richard of St Victor was the first human to have discovered a plausible a priori argument in its favour.

a 'penance'. No one else can repent and apologize for us. But if we cannot make reparation and 'penance', someone else may provide the reparation (and penance) for us—for example, perform the task which we had an obligation to perform but failed to do—so long as we, as it were, offer the substitute's performance to the person whom we have wronged. Although the person whom we have wronged could excuse us from the need to provide reparation (and penance), it is good for us (if the wrongdoing is serious) that he should require some reparation before he forgives us. For thereby he allows us, as free rational creatures, to take responsibility for the consequences of our freely chosen actions. Now humans have wronged God (i.e. sinned) badly. For we have hurt our fellow-creatures (God's creatures) badly, and failed to worship God properly; we have misused the life which God gave us.³ So it is good not merely that God should require us to repent and apologize (for God not to require this would be to condone our wrongdoing), but also good that he should require us to offer at least some reparation. But if we are unable to do so, God himself could provide adequate reparation by living a perfect human life under difficult conditions, typical of those under which many of us have sinned. Since a perfect life would involve total honesty, including protesting against injustice, in so many past cultures it might well be expected to end in a hard death at the hands of the government. Then we can offer this life back to God as our reparation, saying, 'Please accept this life instead of the life we ought to have lived.' To join this prayer to our repentance and our apology acknowledges the seriousness of our wrongdoing. While it is not *necessary* that God himself should provide the reparation by living the requisite sort of life, it is clearly *good* that God should do so; and—given that ordinary humans have such sinful inclinations and owe so much to God anyway by way of grateful service—it is not very likely that any ordinary human would succeed in living a life of sufficient perfection to provide an adequate reparation. But if we are to offer God's human life and death as our reparation for our sin, we need information about how and when he lived and died, and how we are to offer that reparation. We need historical information. Once we have repented, apologized, and offered God's reparation in this way, it would be good for God to excuse us from any need for penance and to forgive us our sins.

³ Our sinning consists both in doing what is in fact wrong (objective wrongdoing) and doing what we believe to be wrong (subjective wrongdoing—the worse kind). For full discussion of our need for atonement and how God could provide it, see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. chs. 5, 9, and 10.

If God has made a world in which we may suffer (in consequence both of the actions of others and of the operation of natural processes), being good, he would do this only if it provides some good for the sufferers or for others. I believe that all the evils of the world are the necessary means to great goods.⁴ For example, my availability to suffer gives to other people the great moral responsibility for choosing freely whether to hurt me or benefit me. Unless God allowed them to succeed in hurting me if they so chose, they would not have any great responsibility for me—it would have been predetermined that all would go well with me, whatever choices others made. And so he allows me to suffer when they do so choose. And God allowing me to suffer or causing me to suffer in some other way gives me the opportunity to deal bravely with my suffering and thereby form a courageous character. I too as a parent may cause a child of mine to suffer for some good cause. For example, suppose that my child and a neighbour's child can eat only food of a certain kind. My neighbour has none of this food, but I have enough to keep both children alive, but not enough to prevent both of them from going hungry if I give my neighbour enough of the food to keep his child alive. In this situation, in order to save the life of my neighbour's child, it is good that I should not give my own child enough food to save him from hunger. But if that is what I do, I have a duty to identify with my child's suffering. That means that I must share her suffering, show her that I am doing so, and show her that I believe the suffering to be worthwhile; and that means that I must bear it bravely. I will do this by going hungry myself, even though I can eat other kinds of food of which I have plenty, and I must do it without grumbling. Analogously, if God causes humans to suffer for a good cause, he must identify with us by sharing bravely the sort of human life and death which involves suffering. And he must provide us with the information that a certain suffering human was God Incarnate.

I suggest that while it is good that God should become incarnate (as a human) to provide atonement for our sins, there is no obligation on him to do so—how can we impose a duty on God by doing wrong? But if God subjects us to serious suffering, there is a duty on him to share it. Yet, even given a priori reasons for holding that God will become incarnate for these two purposes, no a priori reasoning can

⁴ For my full theodicy, my account of how the evils of the world all serve good purposes, see my *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998). If the evils of the world do not serve good purposes, then there is no God of the traditional kind, so there will be no revelation.

yield the historical information of when and where the Incarnation occurred. Ordinary historical inquiry can to some extent test claims that some human (let us call him a prophet) was God who became incarnate for these reasons. For a God incarnate for these reasons would have to live a certain sort of life. He must live a perfect life under difficult conditions, show us (by telling us and/or in some other way) that he believes himself to be God, and that he intends this life to be available to us to use as atonement for our sins. But more is needed, to provide substantial evidence of an atoning and identifying incarnation. We will only have limited information about the prophet's goodness and motives, and he may be badly deceived in his belief in his divinity. We need God himself to authenticate the information for which mere ordinary historical inquiry is an insufficient source.

A third reason why we might expect a revelation is to provide us with encouragement to do what is good and to avoid doing what is bad in future. Now of course the primary reason for doing good actions is intrinsic to them; the primary reason for feeding the poor is that it is good that people have enough to eat. And the primary reason for avoiding bad actions is intrinsic to them; the primary reason for not causing people to suffer is the badness of suffering. (All this is compatible with there occasionally being good reasons for causing suffering or not feeding the poor.) But human parents encourage their children to do good actions by providing subsidiary motives for so doing, making it easier for their children to do good while they are young. Parents offer rewards for well-doing—both rewards of a crude material kind and the reward of their approval—and they threaten punishments—both of a crude material kind and the punishment of their disapproval. God too may wish to encourage good actions and discourage us from bad actions by providing rewards and punishments. And if he does, he will need to tell us that he provides these; otherwise they will have no effect on us. They will include his approval or disapproval, but they may be more substantial. For by our life on earth we form our characters. As Aristotle famously remarked, 'We become just by doing just acts, prudent by doing prudent acts, brave by doing brave acts.'⁵ That is, doing just, prudent, and so on acts, when they do not come naturally, we make ourselves the kind of people who do them naturally. Conversely, by omitting to do such acts again and again, we make ourselves naturally unjust, cowardly, and so on.

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103^b.

Now it may be that there is a Heaven centred on the worship of God and friendship with him in helping others still on earth to reach that state, available after this life for those who have obtained forgiveness for their sins and made themselves naturally good people who would enjoy the life of such a Heaven. And it may be that there is a Hell for those who have allowed themselves to form a bad character. And seeking Heaven and avoiding Hell are good goals for people to have; and God, seeking to make us good people, may offer us the hope of Heaven and warn us of the danger of Hell. And in that case (or if he has some other destiny prepared for us) it would be good for us to know about the possibility of these destinies, in order to help us to do good actions and avoid bad ones—until we have formed a character naturally prone to do these things for their own sakes. And while we can see that a good God might well take to Heaven those who have a holy character and who would enjoy worshipping God in the company of other holy people and forwarding his work on Earth, it is not obvious that he will—he who has given us seventy or so years of life does not owe us more life. The Jews of ancient Israel did not believe, before the second century BC, that God would give them a life after death of any kind. And even if we could work out a priori that God will take the good to Heaven, we cannot work out a priori what God will do with those who have allowed themselves to form a bad character. Maybe he will force a good character on them; or at least allow them to restart the formation of their characters again and again—perhaps an infinite number of times—until they finally form a good character. And anyway, apart from the value of such knowledge in encouraging good conduct, we might well expect a God who wants to be in contact with his rational creatures to give them surer information about his plans and fears for their futures.

And a fourth and most important reason why we might expect a revelation is that quite a lot of human wrongdoing is the result of ignorance of which actions are good and which are bad. That must be the case because of the diversity of views among humans about many moral issues—some people think abortion is never justified, some think that it is always justified, and some hold an intermediate position; some think that euthanasia (to help those who wish to commit suicide to do so) is always justified, some think that it is never justified, and again some hold an intermediate position. God wants humans to be good people, and that means not merely doing what they believe to be good but doing what is good. And for that purpose humans need more moral information.

GOD AND MORALITY

In order to fill out what is involved in our need for moral information, I need to say something about the nature of moral truth and its relation to God. Actions may be morally good, bad, or indifferent. Among good actions are those which are obligatory (i.e. are duties), and ones which go beyond obligation and which we call 'supererogatory'. I am obliged to pay my debts, but not to give my life to save that of a comrade—supremely, 'supererogatorily', good though it is that I should do so (when I have no rival obligations, e.g. to my own family). Obligatory actions are those which we are blameworthy for not doing; supererogatory actions are those which we are praiseworthy for doing. Likewise among bad actions, there are those which it is obligatory not to do—these are wrong actions; and there are bad actions which are not wrong and which I call infravetatory. It is wrong to rape or steal; yet it is bad, but not wrong, to watch many low-grade thrillers on TV rather than read one or two great works of literature. Positive obligations normally arise because of benefits received—I owe my parents much in so far as they have done much for me—or because of commitments, explicit or implicit. I must keep my promises and pay my debts, and I must care for my children (in so far as—normally—I chose to have sexual intercourse which might lead to the procreation of children, and thereby committed myself to looking after any resulting children). Negative obligations—not to do things—normally concern not damaging other people.

Some moral truths are contingent; they are true because of some contingent circumstances, and would not otherwise be true. It's a moral truth that normally I ought not to stick pins into people. But what makes it a moral truth is some non-moral state of affairs—that normally sticking pins into people hurts them, and is not, for example, a conventional and painless means of greeting, or a method of curing disease (i.e. acupuncture). And it is a moral truth that I ought to drive on the left side of the road in the UK. But what makes it so is the contingent non-moral truth that Parliament has decreed that everyone in Britain should drive on the left. No action can be morally good or bad independently of its other properties; it is good or bad because it has certain non-moral properties. And any other action which had just those non-moral properties would have the same moral properties.

The conjunction of non-moral properties which gives rise to the moral property may be a long one or a short one. Maybe all acts of telling lies are bad, or maybe it is, rather, that only all acts of telling lies in such-and-such circumstances (the description of which is a long one) are bad. But it must be that if there is a world *W* in which an action having various non-moral properties (e.g. being an act of telling a lie in such-and-such circumstances) is bad, there could not be another world *W*^{*} which was exactly the same as *W* in all non-moral respects, but in which an action with those non-moral properties was not bad. A difference in moral properties has to arise from a difference in non-moral properties. If a certain sort of killing is not bad in one world, but bad in another world, there must be some difference between the two worlds (e.g. in social organization or the prevalence of crime) which makes for the moral difference. Moral properties, to use the jargon, are supervenient on non-moral properties. And the supervenience must be logical supervenience. Our concept of the moral is such that it makes no *sense* to suppose both that there is a world *W* in which an action *a* is wrong and world *W*^{*} exactly the same as *W* except that in *W*^{*} *a* is good. It follows that there are logically necessary truths of the form 'If an action has non-moral properties A, B and C, it is morally good', 'If an action has non-moral properties C and D, it is morally wrong', and so on. All moral truths are either necessary (of the above kind) or contingent. Contingent moral truths—for example, that it is wrong to cut off people's legs (unless doing so will give them greater well-being than they would have otherwise—e.g. when amputating to prevent gangrene)—derive their truth from some contingent non-moral truth (e.g. that when legs are cut off, they do not grow again, and that a person without legs is unable to do many actions important for their well-being) and some necessary moral truth (e.g. that all acts of depriving other people of abilities to do actions important for their well-being are wrong).

The logically necessary moral truths must be true in virtue of the very nature of the actions with which they are concerned. An act being an act of killing a human (except perhaps to prevent them killing another human, or when it is killing a criminal justly sentenced to death for the crime of murder, or in circumstances to be mentioned below) entails that it is morally wrong. Just as a surface could not be blue without having something in common with a surface which is green, which something is being coloured, so promise keeping and truth telling could not be what they are without having it in common that they are (possibly subject to qualifications) both morally obligatory.

We acquire a sense of morality by being told that such-and-such actions are obligatory or good beyond obligation, and our parents praising us for doing the latter and blaming us when we fail to do the former; and certain other actions are wrong or bad, and our parents blaming us for doing the former, and praising us for failing to do the latter. As with all fundamental concepts, be it 'cause' or 'believe' or 'deduce', we need to be shown or have described to us many instances of their correct application as well as their logical relations to other concepts (e.g. praise or blame) before we can grasp the concepts. The paradigm instances of the 'morally obligatory' (or whatever) will fall into describable kinds—keeping promises, not telling lies, feeding our own children, etc. Once we have in this way, via particular instances or kinds of instances, grasped the concept of the 'morally obligatory', we can come to recognize that some of the instances by which we have been introduced to it are rather different from the others, and that if blame is an appropriate response to failure to perform the former, it is not an appropriate response to failure to perform the latter. We might be told that fighting a duel to defend one's honour is morally obligatory. But we may come to derive through reflection on many other possible situations a general principle that a human life is a very valuable thing, so valuable that no other human should take it from them except perhaps to prevent them killing someone or perhaps as a punishment for killing someone. So we conclude that even if it is appropriate to blame someone who does not kill in a war to save the lives of his fellow soldiers or citizens, it is not appropriate to blame someone for failure to fight a duel to defend his honour. This kind of reflection, together with experience of different human situations, can lead each of us and (over the centuries) the whole human race to improve our grasp of what are the necessary truths of morality. This method of making moral progress is of course the method of 'reflective equilibrium', as described by Rawls.⁶ If someone started with paradigm cases of actions which he called 'morally obligatory', all of which had nothing in common with what most of us regard as morally obligatory, I see no reason to suppose that he has a concept of moral obligation. Fortunately, I believe, different human cultures have moral views which overlap with each other to a sufficient extent, for subsequent experience and reflection (in discussion with others) to enable us to reach a much greater measure of agreement about what are the necessary truths than

⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 20.

we have at present—though, I shall suggest, we probably need some help in order for all of us to reach true views about all necessary truths of morality within a finite time.

There is a tradition of ethics deriving from Aristotle and the Stoics, developing through Cicero, Aquinas, and Grotius, given modern exposition by John Finnis, and much favoured by the Catholic church, called ‘natural law’ ethics.⁷ Its central claim is the claim endorsed in the preceding paragraphs that there are true principles of morality applicable to all human beings, independent of the will of God and discoverable by the exercise of human reason. These principles constitute ‘natural law’. But, at least in Aquinas, and subsequently, this tradition has tended to claim that we can discover these principles by reflecting on the rational and biological nature of human beings. In theory this seems fine. What is good for us depends on the kind of beings we are. It is good to eat and to give others food, because we are the kind of beings which need food to stay alive. But this way of thinking has developed along lines which are far from obvious. The claim is made that what is ‘natural’ for humans is good, and what is ‘unnatural’ is bad. Yet it is unclear how we can determine what is natural for humans except by considering what most humans are ‘naturally’ inclined to do; and then it is far from obvious why doing what humans are ‘naturally inclined’ to do should be good for every human.

Aquinas claimed that reflection on animal behaviour can help to show us which human inclinations are natural. Those matters are said to be matters of natural law which nature teaches all animals—for instance, the coupling of male and female, the bringing up of young, and so forth.⁸ But even if in a certain respect all animals ‘naturally’ behave the same way as each other, why should behaving in that way be good for all humans, who are in some respects very different from animals? The natural law tradition has developed its most controversial claims in the way it has been applied to sexual ethics by many Catholic theologians, and I mention this tradition here because I shall need to allude to it when I discuss sexual ethics in Chapter 11 and point out there that it is not obvious why the almost universal animal inclination to have sexual relations with the opposite sex should make it bad for

⁷ For this tradition see Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law* (Eerdmans, 1999).

⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 2ae. 94. 2. This translation and all other translations from Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* are taken from the edition published by Blackfriars (1963–80).

some humans not inclined to do this to have sexual relations with the same sex. Belief in objective necessary truths does not commit one to this unhelpful method of determining what those truths are. We can use only bare 'reflective equilibrium', without making in advance any further assumptions about the kind of necessary truths which reflective equilibrium will yield.

To return to the main thread of this section—the existence and actions of God can make no difference to what are the necessary moral truths, for since they are necessary truths, nothing can make any difference to them. But the existence and actions of God can make a great difference to what are the contingent moral truths. For, I suggest, among the necessary moral truths is the truth that it is very good to reverence the good and the wise and the truly great, and obligatory to thank and please benefactors. If there is a God, he is all-good and all-wise, and truly great, and (in some sense) a necessary being, and for that reason alone it is very good to worship him. But he is also our supreme benefactor. He is so much more the source of our being than are our parents. God keeps us in existence from moment to moment, gives us knowledge and power and friends; and all the help that other benefactors give us arises from God sustaining in them the power to do so. Hence it becomes a duty to thank him and please him abundantly. One obvious way to please benefactors is to obey their commands. It is in virtue of the necessary truth that beneficiaries have a duty to please benefactors that parents who are not just biological parents but are educating and nurturing parents have certain rights over their children while they are still young to tell them to do certain things—for example, to do the family shopping—and the command creates an obligation which would not otherwise exist. Such parents are our greatest earthly benefactors. It follows that if children have limited duties to obey parents, humans have obligations far less limited in extent to obey our supreme benefactor, God. His command will make it contingently the case that some action which would otherwise be only supererogatorily good or morally indifferent (or—see below—even wrong) is now obligatory; and his forbidding it will make an action contingently wrong when previously it was only infravetatorily bad or morally indifferent. What God does not command, he may commend. And since (perhaps up to a limit) it is supererogatorily good to please benefactors more than you are obliged to, God's commendation can make an action supererogatorily good when it does not make it obligatory. And God's discommendation can make an action infravetatorily bad. Note that while obligations may

be created by issuing commands by means of imperatives (as when I say to my children, 'Go to bed!'), commendations may also, although less frequently, be issued by means of imperatives (as when I say to a colleague who has asked my advice, 'Take the job'). Often the context (e.g. other things the speaker says) is needed to show how the imperative is to be understood.

In my view, and in the view of both Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus,⁹ the obligation to obey a benefactor (even if he is our supreme benefactor) is not the only necessary moral truth concerning human obligations. There are necessary moral truths of obligation which hold independently of any benefactor, including God. As examples, I suggest, the obligation to keep a just promise (i.e. one that you have the right to make—not, e.g., a promise to murder someone); and the obligation not to tell a lie (possibly subject to certain qualifications). It follows that there are some actions which would not become obligatory for us to do, even if God were to command us to do them. But then, in virtue of his perfect goodness, God will not command us to do such actions, for to command what you have no right to command is wrong.

As well as there being necessary truths about how people ought to live, which God cannot abolish, there are, I suggest, also necessary truths about how people ought to live, unless permitted to do otherwise by God. These arise from the fact that as the source of our life, God has rights over us which we do not have over each other. If my life is not a gift from any one (i.e., my present existence does not depend on any personal agent causing me to exist and sustaining me in existence), it is wrong for anyone to take it away from me, to kill me, that is (except perhaps to prevent me killing someone else, or as a judicial punishment for murder). But if there is a God, our life for each of us is a gift from God, a temporary gift; and in the course of time he takes the gift back—sometimes after only a few years, sometimes after eighty years. Barring special circumstances, a giver wrongs no one if he gives one gift to someone and a bigger gift to someone else. God wrongs no one if he gives longer lives to some than to others. And if A has the right to take something from B, he has the right to allow C to do the job for him. So the obligation not to kill is an obligation not to kill (except in the other circumstances mentioned above) unless permitted by God to do so.

⁹ Whether there are any other necessary moral truths is the issue raised by the Euthyphro Dilemma. For the views of Aquinas, Scotus, and others on this, see Additional Note C.

And there are also necessary truths about the kinds of action which are supererogatorily good (or infravetatorily bad) which hold independently of the will of God, some of which he could override (i.e. make it obligatory or good not to do on particular occasions) and maybe some of which he could not override. It is, for example, always good to seek to cure the sick (in the absence of any obligation to use my time in other ways), unless God makes it bad to do so on a particular occasion. God, the giver of life, has the right to allow someone to suffer from a sickness for the sake of the opportunities which that provides the sufferer for showing patience and courage and thereby making himself a more holy person. And so God has the right to make it obligatory for us not to cure a particular sick person; or—more weakly—while not imposing an obligation on us, to make it bad for us to do so.

It follows from all this that if God reveals to us a moral obligation and commands us to fulfil it, the obligation may be in of one four different categories. It may be:

1. God informing us of a necessary moral truth to which God cannot make exceptions, and commanding us to fulfil it. If a parent commands something which is obligatory anyway, it becomes doubly obligatory. So too with the commands of God.
2. God informing us of a necessary moral truth about how we should act unless he permits otherwise, and commanding us to fulfil it. Again, God's command will make the obligation doubly obligatory.
3. God issuing a command to all of us for all time to do some action which would not otherwise be obligatory.
4. God issuing a command to certain groups (possibly for a limited time)—for example, the Israelites before Christ—to do some action which would not otherwise be obligatory.

In Chapter 11 I shall fill out this system of categories in what—if God has revealed moral truths—I shall claim to be a plausible way, by allocating to different categories different examples of actions traditionally regarded by Christians as obligatory.

If God reveals to us that some action is supererogatorily good (or infravetatorily bad), and commends us to do it (or commends us not to do it), he reveals to us that the action belongs to one of four parallel categories—of actions good (bad) whatever he commends, of actions good (bad) unless he commends otherwise, of actions which he makes to be good (bad) for everyone, or of actions which he makes good (bad) only for certain groups or individuals. My discussion will however, for

reasons of space, concentrate on the morally obligatory or wrong, rather than on the supererogatory and the infravetatory.

Why should a perfectly good God issue commands creating obligations in the first two categories? Clearly in order to give us further motivation to do what is obligatory anyway. As I noted earlier, parents often tell their children to do what they ought to do anyway—sometimes, no doubt, because children may not realize what they ought to do; but on other occasions, when children do realize this, to reinforce the obligation. Parents care that their children should do what they ought to do. So too does God. But why should God issue commands creating obligations in categories 3 and 4? For reasons of three kinds.

The first kind of reason (A) is to ensure co-ordination of good actions. Often we have an obligation to do one of a number of equally good actions, of which we can only do one, but each of which it is good that someone should do. One human (in the days before telecommunications) could preach the Gospel only to one town at a time, yet many towns needed to hear the Gospel. If God told Jonah to preach to Nineveh, and someone else to preach to Babylon, this would ensure that the Gospel was preached in both towns. Otherwise both missionaries might journey to Babylon, and Nineveh might not hear the Gospel. Into this category come also divine commands as to who should lead (e.g. Peter or 'the twelve') and who should follow (the other disciples).

The second kind of reason (B) is to get us to do actions which it is good for us to do and which forward God's purposes in an important way, but which without a command of God would be good but not obligatory. Analogously, a parent may tell their child to do the shopping for a sick neighbour, because it is good for the child to help in the family task of looking after the sick neighbour. If God issues a command for this reason, his doing so will serve a further purpose of making us holy, naturally inclined to do supererogatory good actions. Parents want their children to get into the habit of doing what is good beyond obligation. When the children are young, they command them to do actions which, but for the command, would be supererogatory (and such commands may sometimes be backed up by offers of reward or threats of punishment). Commands often have more effect than good advice, but once children get into the habit of doing supererogatorily good actions, the need for commands diminishes. God rightly wants humans to become naturally holy, and so he has reason to help the process of our sanctification by imposing obligations on us (by way of commands) for some or all of our earthly life.

A third less common kind of reason (C) would be to develop our loyalty to and trust in God, when, but for a divine command, the action commanded would be bad or even wrong. God's purported command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac might come into this category. Abraham's faith in God was shown by his taking steps to sacrifice his son, which in the end God did not require him to do.¹⁰ As I argued earlier, God as the author of life had the right to terminate Isaac's life and so to command Abraham to do so; and that command made it permissible, indeed obligatory, for Abraham to kill Isaac (barring a retraction of the command). But otherwise Abraham would not have that right. I should add that if someone is not to be culpable for acting on what they believe to be a divine command to do some action which, but for a divine command, would fairly evidently be wrong, they need a very strong belief that they have been commanded by God to do that action. For they have strong reason for not doing such an action; and only a very strong conviction of the presence of God and his voice commanding that action, or a very strong belief that it was an evident consequence of a public revelation that they had a duty to do the action, would suffice to make it on balance not (subjectively) wrong to perform the action. If with that conviction they do perform the action, that act of trust in God would also help the process of their sanctification.

So humans need information about which actions are obligatory or wrong, good or bad, apart from the commands of God; and also about which actions God has commanded. Thereby they can learn how to become saints. I argued above that we can to some extent find out the necessary moral truths for ourselves. Mere reflection on what it is to be moral should show us that we have a duty to keep our promises and feed our children. But we are subject to temptations to hide from ourselves, or at any rate not to pay attention to, even these most basic moral truths. For coming to hold a different view about moral matters from the view we held previously may lead us to recognize that we have a duty to live our lives in a different way from the way in which we currently live and enjoy living. So we need to be reminded of these basic moral truths.

But it does look as if we are not clever enough to discover some necessary moral truths, which plausibly are either necessary absolutely (category 1 moral truths) or necessary unless God permits us to break them (category 2 moral truths). Consider the currently much debated issues of abortion and euthanasia. Are these practices always wrong, or

¹⁰ Gen. 22: 1–19.

wrong only in some circumstances, and if so in which circumstances? There is a lot to be said on both sides of the debates. If, for example, conception produces immediately a full human being (body and soul), and if all human beings have an equal right to life, then abortion is always wrong. But there are strong counter-arguments against each of these two principles—I give a brief argument against the first principle in Chapter 11. And there are strong arguments too on both sides of the debate about euthanasia. We need help in sorting out these issues. I am inclined to think that some of the truths about these matters (whatever they are, e.g. that abortion is always wrong, or that it is not always wrong) are independent of God's will, and if I am right about this, then we need help in seeing what they are. And of course for knowledge of moral truths which are created by the command of God, we need God to tell us what they are; and if the truths about the morality of abortion or euthanasia are all in this category, then we need God to reveal to us what they are. Current moral disputes about marriage and divorce, homosexuality and cloning, who should govern states, or rule a church, illustrate further our need for God's revelation in helping us to know what is right and what is wrong.

It is good to have true beliefs on important matters, quite independently of the use to which we can put them. It is very good that we should have true beliefs about all the matters which I have listed, quite apart from the fact that having those beliefs will help us to do what is right, or get to Heaven. And although our natural reason can make some progress in big matters, if there is a God, the truth about the universe is a very deep one, well removed from ordinary human experience. We need help from above, in order to understand the deepest reality.¹¹

THE KIND OF REVELATION NEEDED

God may give private revelations to individuals by means of some overwhelming religious experience of things which each of them needs

¹¹ 'God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason... Now we have to recognize an end before we can stretch out and exert ourselves for it. Hence the necessity for our welfare that divine truths surpassing reason should be signified to us through divine revelation' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1. 1. 1). It is for this reason, of course, that we cannot predict in advance the content of revelation. See J. Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (George Bell & Sons, 1902), pt. II, ch. 3, part of the heading of which is 'Of our Incapacity of Judging What were to be Expected in a Revelation'.

to know—for example, what God wants that person to do. But I have been arguing that there are truths of four kinds which all humans need to know; and that is reason for expecting a revelation about the occurrence of which there would be public evidence. For then some humans could help other humans to recognize that the revelation had taken place. In all other matters, humans have deep responsibility for the well-being of others—in so many ways our lives and well-being depend on whether others choose to help us to live and flourish or allow us to be deprived and die. Above all, we have a deep responsibility for helping others to learn important things, and especially a deep responsibility for helping them to learn moral truths; and it is very good that we should have this responsibility. If there is a God, he gives us this deep responsibility for helping each other, and so it is to be expected that he would also give to humans the responsibility for helping each other to knowledge of what he has revealed, and thereby to knowledge of the way to our sanctification. So it is to be expected that there would be a revelation to one or more prophets with evidence that they have had this revelation (of a kind to be considered in the next chapter); and that they could tell others, and the others could tell yet others. In this way, many of us would have the deep responsibility of choosing whether or not to spread the Gospel.

I pointed out earlier that God has reason himself to become incarnate to identify with our suffering and to provide atonement for our sins. God could provide a revelation (including revealing that he had done the former things) through another prophet without himself announcing the revelation while incarnate as a human. But becoming incarnate for either of the other purposes involves living a good life and so showing us in what a good life consists. And anyway, moral instruction by words needs to be filled out by example if we are really to see what living a good life amounts to. And part of a good life usually consists in teaching or showing others how to live well, and providing encouragement for them to do so. Living well (if there is a God) includes getting to know God, and dealing with our wrongdoing and encouraging others to do so. So it is to some extent to be expected that if God becomes incarnate and shows us how to live, he will also in his teaching while incarnate as a human, reveal to us truths of the four kinds mentioned earlier. We have reason to expect a revelation of truths of the four kinds through one prophet claiming the divinity of that prophet sharing our suffering and making atonement for our sins. I shall call such a revelation a ‘major revelation’. But it may be that God will give us one or more other less significant revelations on other occasions.

If, as I have urged, a major purpose of a revelation which includes information about how we ought to live is to enable us to choose whether to live in that way or to neglect to do so, it would be consonant with that purpose that we should also have the opportunity to choose whether to find out by investigation how we ought to live and thereby to find our way to Heaven, or to neglect to investigate this—and so that the revelation should not be too open, but something to be looked for and found. And while it is good that revelation should be available and discoverable, it is good that it should not be too evident, even to those who have discovered it, that they have discovered the revelation. For if it is not too evident to someone that they have discovered the revelation, they can manifest their commitment to the goals which it offers by pursuing them when it is not certain that those goals are there to be had. If it is on balance probable, but no more than probable, that some human has discovered the right way to live (and so—if God offers us the possibility of Heaven—the way to Heaven, understood as the good life after death of worshipping a good creator in the company of others and helping weak humans towards that state), then he can manifest his total commitment to that goal by pursuing it over a period of time when there is some doubt as to whether his quest will be successful. Such pursuit will involve a more total commitment to that goal, will indicate more definitely that that is the goal he chooses above all, and so lead to his forming a character in which the desire for that good life is powerfully dominant. Hence such pursuit will be likely to make the pursuer fitted for Heaven (of the kind described); and since happiness comes from doing and having what you most desire, the more someone desires Heaven, the happier he will be if and when he gets there.

So there is some a priori reason for supposing that any revelation which God provides will be such as requires searching out with the help of others, and such as not to be completely evident even to those who have found it. I am not arguing that it must have such a character; there is a point in not making my salvation too much influenced by what you or I bother to do about it. All I am arguing is that, although it might be good that God reveal himself in other ways, the way which I have described would be very good. Butler emphasized the value of investigation in discovering the content of revelation and of uncertainty about it:

If a prince...desire to exercise or in any sense prove, the understanding or loyalty of a servant, he would not always give his orders in such a plain

manner ... Ignorance and doubt afford scope for probation in all senses ... Men's moral probation may also be, whether they will take due care to inform themselves by impartial consideration, and afterwards whether they will act as the case requires upon the evidence which they have, however doubtful.¹²

But Butler did not bring out the value of helping each other in this task.¹³

REVELATION FOR DIFFERENT CULTURES

How is a major revelation to be made to different centuries and cultures? Of course, God could ensure that, subsequent to his major revelation, there was only one century and culture on Earth. But there would seem to be no reason for him to restrict so narrowly the possibilities for human diversity. Yet, given that he is concerned to reveal himself to different centuries and cultures, he could make a separate revelation to each culture and century. Hinduism and some other religions have claimed that he has done just that. However, any division between cultures and centuries is a highly arbitrary one, as any historian will tell us. Humans are too similar to each other, too much in contact with each other's customs. Those of one culture are capable of transmitting a revelation to those of another culture, and it is good that they should have the opportunity for doing so. Further, if I am right in supposing that God would become incarnate in order to identify with our sufferings, and probably too in order to atone for our sins, then either God incarnate would need to live many hard human lives of identification and atonement, or at most one of many revelations would be associated with one such life. But God could identify with the suffering of each of us by living one perfect life under difficult conditions. And unless it would be good that God should live a separate human life in order to provide an adequate atonement for the sins of each human (which seems implausible), surely one perfect human life would avail for the whole human race. It trivializes the notion of a perfect atoning life to suppose otherwise; what atones is the quality of one life, not the number of lives. One perfect atonement must suffice for the whole human race. It follows that any revelation of God's incarnation to identify with our suffering and provide atonement for our sins must have enough

¹² Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, pt. II, ch. 6, 272–3.

¹³ For a fuller and more satisfactory development of the point, see David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (Duckworth, 1985), 70–5.

connection with the century and culture in which it took place by being derived from detailed reports of it, made by people of that century and culture, to provide reliable evidence of it. And that means that there cannot be totally separate major revelations for different centuries and cultures. Before that revelation and its communication to others who have not heard about it there is, as I wrote above, scope for lesser revelations of the non-historical parts of what subsequently becomes the final revelation, partially intercommunicable between cultures.

But now we come to a serious problem. We need in any one culture a revelation accessible to old and young, male and female, the clever and the stupid, the uneducated and the learned. And this revelation must be transmittable to people of another culture with very different backgrounds of religion, ethics, theoretical science, philosophy, and technology. What *could* such a revelation be like?

God could provide a revelation of one or other of two simple extreme kinds. The first kind of revelation would be a culture-relative revelation, one expressed in terms of the scientific and historical presuppositions (both true and false) of the culture to which it was addressed, and giving moral instruction applicable to the situation of members of that culture. Thus the doctrine of creation might be expressed on the presupposition that the world was as described by the then current science, for instance as a flat Earth, covered by a dome, above which was Heaven—‘God made the Heaven and the Earth.’¹⁴ On the presupposition that the world came into existence 4,000 years earlier, it would teach that it was then that God caused it to be. It would teach that God had made atonement for our sins, using the analogies of sacrifice and law familiar to those in the culture. It would teach the moral truths which those living in that culture needed to know (e.g. those concerned with whether people ought to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, or to obey the Jewish food laws); but it would contain no guidance on the morality of artificial insemination by donor, or medical research on embryos. It would offer the hope of Heaven to those who lived the right life. And it would express this hope using a presupposition of the culture that Heaven was situated spatially above the Earth.

Such a revelation would be perfectly adequate for providing its immediate recipients with guidance on how to live lives on Earth, have the right attitude to God, plead an atonement for the forgiveness of their sins, and aspire to Heaven; it would, that is, provide enough information

¹⁴ Gen. 1: 1.

of the kind described earlier for the people of that culture to live saintly lives. The limitation of its moral instruction to what was relevant to that community would hardly matter, and its metaphors and analogies would be comprehensible there. False scientific presuppositions would make no difference to the religious content of the message—that is, to the kind of life and worship which it sought to encourage. A mistaken view of what God had created, or where Heaven was, would not affect the praiseworthiness of God, or the desirability of Heaven. It therefore follows from the argument of Chapter 2 that, so long as context allows a clear distinction between statement and presupposition, false scientific presuppositions would not render the revelation false. That clear distinction could be made if, for example, the revelation was announced as a rival to some other metaphysical message or moral code which nevertheless shared the same scientific world-view. That would show that the world-view was not part of the revelation, but rather something taken for granted in the culture with which the revelation was not concerned.

The problem, however, is that a revelation of that kind could not be transmitted, as it stood, to those of another culture. Such a revelation to Jews who believed that the Earth was flat and a mere 4,000 years old would be of little use, as it stood, to the philosophers¹⁵ who met on the Areopagus in Athens in the first century AD and who believed that the Earth was spherical and everlasting, let alone to literate and numerate Anglo-Americans of today. It would need to be retranslated into the vocabulary of each new culture. That could be done only by someone who could think away the presuppositions of the two cultures, and make the distinction between the presuppositionless message and the presuppositions in terms of which it was clad. An intellectual can to some extent perform this exercise, but only in so far as he has a grasp of the message expressible by presuppositionless sentences. Can there be such a person? Yes, but only in so far as there could be a culturally independent revelation. To this issue I now turn.

The second kind of revelation which God could provide would be a culturally independent one. In a way this could be done. God would give us a creed formed of sentences which made no scientific or historical presuppositions. But such a creed would still not necessarily serve the purpose of providing sentences translatable into other languages and usable by other cultures, which provided clear guidance of the kind

¹⁵ See the description of St Paul's encounter with them in Acts 17: 16–34.

described above—for the reason described in Chapter 2. You can express claims which do not presuppose the scientific and historical presuppositions of the culture; but those presuppositions still function, not as presuppositions, but as boundaries fixing the range within which your sentences make clear claims with clear entailments. The consequences of your sentences become less and less clear as your scientific and historical world-view changes.

Thus suppose God gives us the doctrine of creation without using any such cultural presupposition as that the universe consists of a flat Earth covered by a dome by giving us instead the sentence ‘God created everything.’ That could be understood as implying that God created God, which is self-contradictory. Perhaps God would do better with the sentence ‘God created everything other than God.’ But that might seem to have the consequence that God created logical truths—for example, God made it the case that ‘for all propositions p , not both p and not- p ’ (the law of non-contradiction). But that apparent consequence does not seem true (surely the law of non-contradiction would hold even if there were no God); and in any case hardly seems to be part of the doctrine of creation. Let us try ‘God created everything logically contingent other than God.’ But since unicorns are things logically contingent other than God, this might seem to have the consequence that God created unicorns. So it had better be phrased, ‘God created everything which exists, and whose existence is logically contingent, other than himself.’ I could go on improving this sentence for a long time—indeed, much of my book *The Coherence of Theism*¹⁶ was an exercise in spelling out coherently and rigorously the claim that there is a God, along the lines which I have begun to pursue in this paragraph for the doctrine of God as creator. I was trying to spell out with considerable philosophical rigour, avoiding the scientific presuppositions of my culture, what the claim that there is a God amounted to. But I would have been deluding myself if I had supposed that I had achieved maximum rigour. There is no such thing. At best I have provided a spelling-out which gives a clear answer to the main concerns of our culture about that doctrine. But I did not phrase it, and could not have phrased it, in such a way that it would be clear what were the consequences of the doctrine with respect to questions which might interest *any* culture.

The reason for this is the philosophical reason set out in Chapter 2. It is of the nature of human language that we derive our understanding

¹⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. edn. (Clarendon Press, 1993).

of the meanings of words and sentence forms from seeing them used in a publicly agreed way in familiar circumstances. We learn the senses of the terms by which 'God' is defined—'person', 'able to do everything', 'knows everything', and so on—and also of the other terms used in expositions of the doctrine of creation—'create', 'logically contingent', and so on—by seeing them or terms by which they are defined used in many different mundane situations. That gives us a grasp of their meaning which allows us to use them in many new situations, and to use them to discuss many new possibilities; but it does not give us an understanding of their meaning sufficient to guide us as to how to apply them in some utterly different situations, or in discussing possibilities hitherto quite unenvisaged. 'God created everything' is a satisfactory account of the doctrine of creation, given that the only possible kinds of 'thing' we envisage are such things as trees and humans and lakes and plants and angels. The doctrine has the consequence for each such thing that God is its creator. But once a culture begins to consider other possible cases of 'things'—for example, logical truths—it is unclear what 'God created everything' has to say about these. Is it committed to holding that God created logical truths? We can improve the formulation to make the answer clear. Other possible 'things' are then brought to our attention—for example, unicorns; we then legislate that really there are no such 'things'. And so we go on. New cultures always raise new questions of interpretation, and the consequences of old sentences for their concerns become unclear. The explicit mention of the presuppositions of the culture may have been eliminated from the sentences of a creed. The sentences may no longer make explicit reference to 'Heaven and Earth'. But the presuppositions still operate in a different way: to determine for which areas of enquiry (i.e. those of which the culture is well aware) the sentences have clear consequences, and for which areas they do not. Sentences of a human language have meaning only to the extent to which its speakers can grasp that meaning, and as (being only human) they cannot conceive of all the possible concerns of future cultures, they cannot have sentences whose consequences for the concerns of those cultures are always clear. If God chooses to reveal his message in human language, he chooses a tool too feeble to convey an unequivocal message to all nations and generations unless backed up in some way.

A further contingent difficulty additional to this formal logical difficulty standing in the way of God conveying his revelation by means of presuppositionless sentences is that the more presuppositions are

removed from revealed sentences, and the more they are made logically rigorous, the less accessible they will be to the relatively uneducated majority of members of that culture. These will then need an intellectual elite to translate the message in terms which they can understand.

So the message of a revelation will inevitably become less clear as it is passed from one culture to another. There are a number of ways in which God could make the original revelation such that the process of obscurity was slower. He could provide both a culture-relative and a culturally independent revelation, such that each could provide a check on the interpretations drawn from the other—a New Testament Gospel as well as a *Summa-cum-Denzinger-cum-catechism*.¹⁷ Or he could provide simultaneously, together with a revelation in terms of one culture, a translation of it into the terms of another culture. If you have, as well as an original literary work, one translation of it into one foreign language, authorized by the author, you will then be able to see far better how to translate it into other foreign languages. For you will be helped to see from the example provided what has to be preserved in translation, and what can be altered. But all of this would still not be enough to counter the processes of obscurity which I have described. The content of the message would still not be guaranteed always to be evident to yet other cultures with new interests and concerns. Not even God can give unambiguous culturally independent instructions accessible to humans limited not merely by the knowledge, but by the concerns and interests, of their own culture.

If the revelation is to be public, it must consist of publicly accessible unwritten or (better) written traditions. But it cannot consist solely of original documents or other proclamations; *continuing* guidance is required, a mechanism which helps translators of the original revelation to get their translation correct. As well as documents containing statements of the revelation in one or more cultures, there must be such a thing as a church in which translations have a better chance of success than they would otherwise. There are various ways in which God

¹⁷ Many of the great medieval philosopher-theologians, such as St Thomas Aquinas, wrote a *Summa Theologiae*, a very lengthy detailed and interconnected exposition and justification of their theological systems. In the nineteenth century H. Denzinger collected together all the proclamations of Councils and Popes which he regarded as being authoritative expositions of the Christian revelation, in an *Enchiridion symbolorum* (a handbook of definitions); later editions of Denzinger have been produced by others. Various church bodies have produced catechisms which summarize what these bodies regard as the content of Christian Revelation. Most recently and notably, Pope John Paul II produced a new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (English trans., Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).

could effect that result through a church. There could be an infallible authority in the church which pronounced from time to time on which interpretations were correct. In his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman argued that:

In proportion to the probability of true developments of doctrine and practice in the Divine Scheme, so is the probability also of the appointment in that scheme of an external authority to decide upon them, thereby separating them from the mass of mere human speculation, extravagance, corruption and error, in and out of which they grow. This is the doctrine of the infallibility of the Church.¹⁸

This infallibility could be mediated through an individual or through the majority vote of some council, chosen by a certain procedure.

Alternatively, God might ensure that, while no one mechanism guaranteed truth, truth would emerge in the long run by consensus within the church, distinguished as such by some organizational continuity and continuity of doctrine with the original revelation. The consensus would be obtained by moral, scientific, and philosophical reflection in the light of experience on the original content of revelation, and the way in which it had been developed and expounded in intervening centuries. There would be no one stopping-point to controversy, but a general direction by God of interpretation, compatible with some error by individuals, groups, or even generations. God could have provided either of these methods for guaranteeing the preservation of his revelation for new centuries and cultures. The former method might seem to grant an all-or-nothing status to some written documents. You believe that or you believe nothing; there is little scope for an individual to work out for himself which parts of revelation fit best with other parts and with what his natural reason tells him about God. At least, that is so in so far as it is fairly certain what (if there has been a revelation) is the infallible authority for interpreting it; otherwise, of course, the individual will have plenty of work to do to discover if there is an infallible authority—and part of that work will consist in considering whether the ‘interpretations’ proclaimed by some purported infallible authority are plausible interpretations of the original revelation.¹⁹ All the same, this first method gives

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1st pub. 1845; 1878 edn., Longman, Green, & Co., 1906), 78. Newman held that the process of doctrinal evolution consisted in developing, by a process more intuitive than deduction, ideas which were implicit in an original formulation. See my fuller discussion of doctrinal evolution in Ch. 8.

¹⁹ As Newman urged, asking rhetorically, ‘What is inconsistent’ in the idea of ‘a probable infallibility?’ (ibid. 81). And he went on to claim: ‘We have then, no warrant

much less scope than the consensus method for the individual to sort things out for himself, to take individual doctrines seriously and reflect upon them. On the other hand, the consensus method of guaranteeing the preservation of revelation could prove rather weak. A priori considerations do not seem to me to give much greater prior probability to one method over the other method (or to the individual authority variant over the council authority variant of the first method) of ensuring the preservation of a revelation.²⁰ But some method there must be if the revelation is not to die out. And it must therefore be part of the original revelation which subsequent ecclesial body constitutes the interpreting church; and it must be derivable therefrom how its interpretations are to be recognized, and what are the limits to their authority.

So far I have been arguing that if there is a God, there is good a priori reason for expecting a propositional revelation, in connection with an incarnation, identifying with our suffering and providing atonement for our sins, and for expecting some means to be provided for preserving and rightly interpreting that revelation for new centuries and cultures. I have not yet considered what form the original revelation might take, except to suggest that, at any rate in part, it will be formulated in terms of the presuppositions of the original culture. Again there are various possibilities. At one extreme is a Koran, a book dictated by the original revealer, or prophet, as I shall call him. (Indeed, it seems more accurate to say that in Islam the vehicle of the original revelation is a text, the Koran, rather than a prophet or a community; the role of Muhammad was simply to receive and transmit the word-by-word inspiration coming from God himself.) Alternatively, the original prophet might talk, and various others record some of the things which he said and did; and the kind of life he led might help us to understand the kind of life which he was commending to us. The former method would have the disadvantage that it might encourage excessive literalism of observance, making it difficult for future generations to have the courage to apply an original command, intended only for a particular culture, to a new

at all for saying that an accredited revelation will exclude the existence of doubts and difficulties on the part of those whom it addresses, or dispense with anxious diligence on their part.' And after the qualifying clause, 'though it may in its own nature tend to do so', he added boldly, 'Infallibility does not interfere with moral probation; the two notions are absolutely distinct' (ibid. 82–3).

²⁰ I shall discuss in Ch. 8 the a posteriori evidence (from the words of Jesus and the subsequent history of the Church) relevant to claims that (if the Christian Revelation is true) God has used one of these methods or some intermediate method rather than another method, to guarantee the preservation of his revelation.

culture. If the prophet (who was God Incarnate, or at least his very special messenger) wrote that it was wrong to take money on usury, or laid down rules for the right way to treat slaves, and these were his *ipsissima verba*, then future generations would find it difficult to introduce a system of lending money on interest for commercial investment or to abolish slavery, thinking that God himself had forbidden taking interest, and had commended slavery, for all time. A little distancing of the revelation from the prophet, and plenty of versions of it on which new generations can get to work to apply it to new circumstances, has much to be said for it.

So perhaps many books written by many authors, each recording and applying the teaching of the prophet; overlapping, stressing different aspects of revelation, and occasionally contradicting each other. This will give new cultures plenty of scope to work out which historical documents contain the original revelation, and plenty of examples in those documents from which they can work out how the revelation can be expressed in the terms of their own culture.

The later community will have to make the distinction between the presuppositions of the original documents and their informative content. One help here will be if there are examples in the original revelation of that revelation cast in different philosophical or scientific moulds. Another help will be if the intervening centuries have reinterpreted the revelation into the terms of their own culture. Later generations can then look back and, seeing what was taken for granted in each culture, see the revelation as that content which went beyond the presuppositions of the culture, and remained the same when it was put in terms of a new culture. However, to repeat my earlier point, distinguishing the presuppositions of the original revelation from its informative content is not enough. If revelation is to answer new questions raised by a new culture, it needs a church to interpret it, in one of the ways compatible with its original meaning rather than in other ways, so as to give true answers to the questions of the new culture.

6

The Four Tests for a Revelation

So much for the need for revelation and—given the existence of significant other evidence for the existence of God—the sort of major revelation we might expect to find. What will show, among candidate revelations, which (if any) is a real revelation from God? A candidate revelation purports to be a message from God, and in order to see whether it is that, we must apply the kinds of tests which we apply to a letter to see whether it comes from whom it purports to come.

In the case of an ordinary human letter there are three kinds of relevant test. First, there is the test of content (including style): whether the content of the letter is the kind of thing the purported author would have written to the purported recipient at the time in question. The second test is that of the method of expression: whether the paper on which it was written, the type of handwriting and, above all, the signature are those characteristic (and ideally uniquely characteristic) of the purported author. And thirdly, there is the test of transmission: whether the letter could have travelled from the purported author to where it was found. If we extrapolate from the case of a human letter to the case of a purported revelation from God, these tests will take the following form. The first test will be whether the content of the purported revelation is the kind of thing which God would have chosen to reveal to humans. The second test will be whether the method of expression is one to be expected of God (if there is a God); and if this test is to provide in any way strong evidence of the genuineness of the revelation, it must be evidence that the method of expression is one to be expected of God alone. It must involve God producing it by a method which no one else can use; and that, we shall see, means by means of a miracle. There can be no equivalent to the third test, since (if there is a God) God is omnipotent, and so he can produce a message anywhere at any time. There are, however, two further tests applicable in the case of a purported public revelation from God. For

the reasons given in the last chapter, the original revealed teaching must include the teaching about which body, which church, is authorized to elaborate and clarify that teaching subsequently; and the elaborations and clarifications which it subsequently provides must provide plausible developments of what was involved in the original revelation. The third test is that the church has developed the original revelation in a way which plausibly brings out what was involved in it, and applies it to new situations in a natural way. A revelation intended for all humans which gets distorted beyond recognition is not the kind of revelation which God would have given. And the fourth test is the test whether the interpretations provide the sort of teaching which God would have chosen to give to humans.

In discussing these issues I will assume, for the reasons given in the previous chapter, that the candidate revelation takes the form of some prophet announcing that he has such-and-such a message from God for us. The latter could include the prophet's authentication of some book, or the teaching of others (e.g. his immediate disciples). It could, however, take the form of the public discovery of some book without the involvement of any prophet. The tests for the genuineness of a revelation which I am about to analyse could easily with small changes be made applicable to claims to a purported revelation in which no prophet was involved.

THE TEST OF ORIGINAL CONTENT

By the content of the original purported revelation I mean its message, as opposed to the presuppositions in terms of which the message is cast, with the words in the sentences uttered by the prophet or inscribed in the purportedly revealed book taken in the senses dictated by the principles analysed in Part I. The Koran reports God as saying, 'I created with my two hands.'¹ If the Koran is regarded as the word of God and we have good reason to suppose that God has no body, God's talk about his 'hands' must be treated as metaphorical—for example, as meaning his 'grace'. So argued the Mu'tazilites, one group of Islamic theologians, on the basis of other passages in the Koran which implied that God has no body. Other Islamic theologians, however, claimed that we must take talk about God's 'hands' in a literal sense, although allowing

¹ Sura 38: 75.

that God's hands might not be ones very similar to our hands.² Also, commands which the prophet or book represents as God's commands may create obligations of any of the four categories which I distinguished in the previous chapter, and I shall be discussing in Chapter 11 how to distinguish to which category an obligation belongs. If the prophet were to say, in a society in which slavery and soldiering were parts of normal life, 'Slaves, be obedient to your masters,'³ or 'Soldiers, be content with your wages,'⁴ and declare that he was transmitting the commands of God, those commands cannot necessarily be seen as endorsements of slavery and soldiering. The prophet may be presupposing the existence of the institutions and simply telling individuals caught up in them how to behave. What these commands clearly rule out is disobedient slaves and soldiers mutinying for money at the time and in the circumstances of the command being issued. Whether they rule out more than that can only be determined by the context in a way to be explored later.

In the last chapter I analysed the kind of topics on which God might be expected to give us a major revelation—his own nature, whether and how he had become incarnate to identify with our sufferings and to atone for our sins, moral truths, and his plans for our future, together with his declaration that a church would continue his work, including proclamation of the revealed truths. But, just as the main point of a revelation is to tell us things for which we do not already have adequate evidence, so also it may concern matters about which (before receiving the revelation) we do not realize that it is important that we should have true beliefs. In general God leaves us to find out things for ourselves; and it is good for us that it is up to us to do this. God is only going to intervene publicly in history to tell us things which are important for our deepest well-being and which we cannot find out with sufficient certainty for ourselves. So one part of the first test of the genuineness of the content of a candidate revelation is whether it concerns such deep and important matters.

God, being omniscient and perfectly good, will not tell us anything false.⁵ Hence the second part of the test for whether the content of

² See D. Waines, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 117–22.

³ Eph. 6: 5; other verses in other of St Paul's and St Peter's Epistles contain similar commands.

⁴ Luke 3: 14, a saying attributed to John the Baptist.

⁵ That is of course compatible with the prophet unintentionally giving false information on mundane matters—how old he is, which road leads to Jericho, or where he left

the purported revelation is the kind of thing which God would have chosen to reveal to humans is whether it is true; and any independent reason we have for believing that some of the content of a candidate revelation is true is reason to suppose that the revelation is genuine, and any independent reason we have for believing that some of the content of a candidate revelation is false is reason to suppose that the revelation is not genuine. For example, a candidate revelation must not contain moral claims incompatible with any clear intuitions we have about what are the necessary truths of morality. If it tells us that rape and lying, murder and theft (without exceptional divine permission), are good, then that is good reason for supposing the candidate revelation not to be a genuine one.

A candidate revelation may contain claims which we are not clever enough to see to be true before we hear the claims, but which are such that once the claims have come to our notice, we can come to see by methods independent of revelation that they are true. I remarked in a note to the previous chapter⁶ that a philosopher may be able to show by a priori argument what he has learnt as an item of Christian Revelation, that God is a Trinity. Or again, Jesus taught in the parable of the tares and the wheat⁷ (interpreted in the obvious way) that the reason why God does not immediately destroy imperfectly developed, wicked people is that doing so would harm imperfectly developed, good people. But subsequently a philosopher may put forward an argument to show why this is so. The argument may be that it is good for people not to be made perfectly good at the start of their lives, but to develop good characters through making good choices when it is difficult; and that the presence of the wicked threatening to hurt us and actually hurting us provides those circumstances which make it difficult to make good choices. Analogously, we may not be able to see that some theorem purportedly proved by an eminent mathematician is true, but we rightly accept it on his authority. But someone may then show us a proof of this theorem, and we may be clever enough to see that the proof is sound; what we first learnt on authority, we may subsequently come to see to be true by a priori reasoning.

his clock—which he does not claim to be part of the content of revelation. For how even an incarnate God can have false beliefs on mundane matters, see *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), ch. 9.

⁶ Ch. 5 n. 2.

⁷ Matt. 13: 24–30.

The reasons which we have or may acquire, independently of revelation, for believing that some of what is purportedly revealed is probably true or probably false may be *a posteriori* (empirical), as well as *a priori*. The candidate revelation may contain (and, I have claimed, may be expected to contain) a claim that God became incarnate as a certain human prophet at a certain time and place and led a perfect life under difficult conditions, in order to identify with our suffering and to make atonement for our sins. If it does make such a claim, then there may be ordinary historical evidence of the kind to be expected if that prophet did live a perfect life under difficult conditions. Alternatively, there may be good historical evidence of some evidently immoral conduct by the prophet, and that would count against that revelation being genuine. As I argued in Chapter 5, if God became incarnate as a certain prophet for these purposes, it is to be expected that it would be part of the revelation provided by that prophet that he was God Incarnate, and that he was making atonement for our sins. In relation to claims about the content of the original revelation (e.g. that the prophet claimed that he was God Incarnate making atonement for human sins), and any other historical claims which form part of the revelation—for example, claims that the incarnate God was born of a virgin and died on a cross—there can in principle be normal historical evidence for and against. To the extent to which that evidence makes the claims probably true, to that extent it adds to the probability that the revelation is a genuine one.

However, a revelation may be expected to contain claims that we cannot possibly confirm by mere human reflection or ordinary historical investigation. These include claims about God's plans for our future (that the world will or will not come to an end at some unspecified future time, that God will take all humans to Heaven after their death, or that he will take only the good humans, or that there is no afterlife). They also include claims about the moral truths which God has made true (the obligations binding on us in virtue of God's commands—see p. 92). And clearly with respect to many of the purportedly revealed claims about which we can have some *a priori* or empirical evidence of the kinds described, that evidence is not going to be nearly sufficient to make those claims probable. The claim that some human who claimed to be God did certain things which one would expect an incarnate God to do will not by itself make it very probable that that human was God Incarnate. All that can reasonably be required of the test of content is that the content of a candidate revelation should not be very improbable on grounds independent of revelation. I shall in future often use the

word 'plausible' to mean 'not very improbable on grounds independent of revelation'.

THE TEST OF MIRACLE

So satisfying the test of content fairly well would not be sufficient to show some candidate revelation to be genuine; the mere fact that there is no very probable falsity in some purported revelation is not adequate for this purpose. We need also the second test of the method of expression. The purported revelation needs to be delivered in a way that God alone can deliver it. It needs to come with God's authenticating signature. A signature in a wide sense is an act which can be performed readily only by the person whose signature it is (or by someone else with his permission) and which is recognized as a mark of endorsement in the culture in which it was made. Cultures vary in respect of which acts they recognize as marks of endorsement. A person's name handwritten by himself or herself at the end of a document constitutes a signature in our culture, as did the imprint of a signet ring in earlier cultures. Ancient Israel recognized a violation of a law of nature by the agency of some prophet which forwarded the work of that prophet as just such a mark of endorsement by God. When Elijah called on God to provide fire from Heaven to ignite a water-sodden sacrifice,⁸ he was (in modern terminology) calling on God to perform an act which would violate a law of nature. God alone who sustains laws of nature has the power to set them aside (and no one else can do this except with his permission). According to the Bible, when the fire came from Heaven, it led to the acceptance by Israel of Elijah's teaching and the elimination of the prophets of Baal. Hence Israel recognized this as God's endorsement of Elijah's teaching. Following a similar definition by Hume,⁹ I shall understand by a 'miracle' a violation (or what I shall call a 'quasi-violation') of a fundamental law of nature by the act of God (or some agent permitted to do this by God). So before taking the argument further, I need to spell out this understanding of a violation (or quasi-violation) of a fundamental law of nature and to consider what

⁸ 1 Kgs. 18: 17–40. I am citing the occurrence in the Bible of this story as evidence of what the ancient Israelites believed about what counted as a mark of endorsement by God of the teaching of a prophet. It is not important for my present purpose whether or not the events recorded in 1 Kings really occurred.

⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 10. 1. 90 n.

would be evidence for the occurrence of such an event, and so for the occurrence of a miracle.¹⁰

Physical objects or volumes of stuff of different kinds have different powers and liabilities to act. Water has the power to turn into steam and the liability (of physical necessity) to do so when it reaches 100° C. Stones have the power to fall to the ground, and the liability to do so (of physical necessity) when free of constraint and close to but above the surface of the Earth. Every physical object has the power to attract every other physical object in the universe with a force of the strength determined by Newton's 'law of gravity' and the liability (of physical necessity) always to exercise that power. The Israelites thought that any clouds in the sky at the time of Elijah's act did not have the requisite powers (and liabilities to exercise them at that time) to produce lightning which would ignite a fire fierce enough to ignite a water-sodden sacrifice. The liabilities of objects to exercise powers may be liabilities to act either of physical necessity or of physical probability. The physical probability of an object to exercise some power is its propensity to do so, the strength of which may be measured between 1 (a physical probability of 1 is physical necessity) and 0 (a physical probability of 0 is physical impossibility). Intermediate values measure the strength of the bias to exercise some power. Deterministic laws have the form 'Of physical necessity all *As* do *B*'. Probabilistic laws have the form 'All *As* have a physical probability of *p* of doing *B*'; that is, all *As* have a propensity of strength *p* to do *B* when *p* is measured between 1 and 0. 'Laws of nature' are simply statements which record in brief form these powers and liabilities of physical objects.¹¹ Thus Newton's law of gravity states that all physical objects attract all other physical objects with a force proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of their distance apart. More fundamental laws of nature explain the operation of less fundamental laws in particular circumstances. Thus Newton's laws of motion and his law of gravitational attraction together explain Galileo's law that all small bodies near the surface of the Earth and free from constraint fall

¹⁰ There follows a very brief account of how the concept of miracle should be understood in this kind of religious context and of what would constitute evidence for the occurrence of a miracle. For a fuller and more rigorous account, see my *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2004), ch. 12.

¹¹ For argument that the 'laws of nature' are simply regularities in the powers and liabilities of individual physical objects, see my 'Relations between Universals, or Divine Laws?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (2006), 179–89.

towards that surface with an approximately constant acceleration. The fundamental laws—that is, laws not explained by more fundamental laws—determine the behaviour of objects, in so far as their behaviour is law-like. Or, to speak strictly, the fundamental powers and liabilities of objects determine their less fundamental powers and liabilities. For the sake of simplicity of exposition, I shall in future normally use the way of talking used by scientists since the seventeenth century and talk of ‘laws’ determining the behaviour of objects, rather than talk of the powers and liabilities of objects determining their behaviour; but I intend the former way of talking only as shorthand for the latter.

I understand by a ‘violation’ of a fundamental deterministic law of nature ‘Of physical necessity all *As* do *B*’ the occurrence of an *A* which does not do *B*. (To speak strictly again, violations and quasi-violations of natural laws are simply temporary changes in the fundamental powers and liabilities of physical objects not caused by other physical objects in virtue of their powers and liabilities.) If fundamental laws of nature provide full explanations of all events within their scope (e.g. the behaviour of all *As*) and nothing explains their operation (they are the ultimate determinants of what happens; nothing more ultimate determines whether or not they operate), there can be no violations of laws of nature. There can only be violations if some power from outside the system of natural laws (i.e. something non-physical, not acting in virtue of the powers and liabilities of physical objects), God or some lesser deity, determines whether a law operates (i.e. the necessity involved in the operation of laws of nature is contingent on that power.)

The evidence that some event *E* is a violation is that its occurrence is incompatible with what are probably (on the evidence we have) the fundamental laws of nature. The evidence that a purported law is a true law comes from its explanatory power (its power to explain the data) and its prior probability. Suppose that we have observed many positions of planets, and propose a law, ‘All planets move in ellipses’. From the proposed law and some of the observed positions, we can predict all the other positions, positions which we would have no other reason to expect—which gives the proposed law high explanatory power. The proposed law is a simple one, which (given that it fits well with what we know about the laws of nature operative in other areas of inquiry) suffices to give it high prior probability. All of this justifies the claim that the proposed law is a law of nature, and hence justifies the expectation that it will hold in future without exception.

Suppose that one day Mars moves out of its elliptical path for a brief period and then returns to the path. There are two possibilities. This wandering of Mars may occur because of some current condition of the universe (e.g. the proximity of Jupiter drawing Mars out of its elliptical path), such that if that condition were to be repeated, the event would happen again in virtue of a more fundamental law of nature than the original purported fundamental law, 'All planets move in ellipses'. In this case the wandering of Mars would have been an entirely regular phenomenon, although what might have appeared originally to be a fundamental law of nature proves now not to be one. It proves to be a consequence of a more fundamental law both that the original purported law holds in normal circumstances and that under circumstances describable in general terms (e.g. 'when other planets are close to Mars') there are exceptions to it. Such repeatable exceptions to a purported law merely show that the purported law is not a fundamental law of nature. The other possibility is that the exception to the law was not caused by some current condition in virtue of a more fundamental law, in such a way that if the condition were to recur, the event would happen again. In this case we have a non-repeatable exception to a law of nature. We would have grounds for believing that the exception is non-repeatable in so far as any attempt to amend or replace the purported law of nature so that it predicted the wandering of Mars as well as all the other observed positions of Mars would give us a purported new law so complicated internally and so dissonant with the rest of scientific knowledge which constitutes our background evidence, that we would have no grounds for trusting its future predictions. It is no good, for example, amending the law so that it reads 'Of physical necessity all planets move in ellipses except in years when there is a competition for the World Chess Championship between two players both of whose surnames begin with K'. Why not? Because this proposed law mentions properties which have no other place in physics (no other physical law invokes the surnames of humans as an influence on the behaviour of inanimate physical phenomena); and it mentions them in the form of an exceptive clause, 'so-and-so holds except under such-and-such circumstances', involving two variables, 'movements of planets' and 'surnames of competitors', of kinds which have no intrinsic connection with each other. What we need if the exception to the original law is to be explained by a more fundamental law is a simple formula consonant with the rest of physics, of which it is a consequence that the exception to the original law occurs when it does.

In these ways we could have grounds for believing that an exception to a purported law was non-repeatable. This would show that its occurrence was incompatible with the fundamental laws of nature, and so is a violation of a law of nature. The cause of this event must lie outside the system of natural laws (outside the system of physical objects). Claims of this sort are of course corrigible—we could be wrong; what seemed inexplicable by natural causes might be explicable after all. But we could be wrong about most things, including claims of the opposite kind—what seems explicable by natural causes might not be explicable after all. But the rational investigator goes by the evidence available to him at the time; so he supposes that what is, on all the evidence, a violation of a law of nature really is one. It is very probable indeed that events such as the following, if they occurred, would be violations of laws of nature: resurrection from the dead of a man whose heart has not been beating for thirty-six hours and who counts as dead by other currently used criteria; water turning into wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts; a person growing a new arm from the stump of an old one without surgical intervention; levitation (some one praying rising up in the air).

Suppose now that the fundamental laws of nature in some field are probabilistic. They will not then be incompatible with any occurrence whatsoever, and so the strict notion of a 'violation' of a law of nature will have no application. If a purported law says that 'All *As* have a physical probability of 0.9999 of doing *B*', then however many *As* occur which do not do *B*, their occurrence will not be ruled out by the law; it is merely very very improbable that a large proportion of some finite class of *As* will not do *B*. I understand by a 'quasi-violation' of a purported law of nature *L* an event the occurrence of which is, given *L*, very very improbable (in comparison with other events described in equal detail which could, given *L*, have occurred instead of it—for example, only one out of one hundred instead of ninety out of one hundred observed *As* doing *B*).

Now suppose that among events compatible with some law *L* one (*E*) occurs which is so improbable, given *L*, that its occurrence counts very strongly against the claim that *L* holds without exception. Yet there may be no other simple formula which predicts more accurately what happens. Any attempt to amend or replace *L* so as to have a law which predicts more accurately might give us a law so complicated internally and dissonant with the rest of scientific knowledge, that we would have no grounds for trusting its subsequent predictions. In such a case,

it is very probable that E is a quasi-violation of a law of nature. It is compatible with Quantum Theory that all the atoms in a large block of carbon-14 should decay simultaneously in the next minute, but it is so vastly improbable (in comparison with the probability that, say, 0.00003 of them should decay in the next minute) that the occurrence of such an event would rightly be regarded as casting very grave doubt on that theory. Nevertheless, there might be so much other evidence in favour of Quantum Theory that to amend it solely to deal with such an apparent counter-instance would make it so complex as to make it unlikely that its other predictions would be correct. In those circumstances it is probable that the apparent counter-instance is a quasi-violation of a probabilistic law. And so, even if the fundamental laws of nature include the probabilistic laws of Quantum Theory, levitations and all the other events listed two paragraphs ago would still be rightly considered to be quasi-violations of natural laws—so improbable is it that the small indeterminacies at the atomic level allowed by Quantum Theory would permit their occurrence.

To speak again strictly, violations and quasi-violations of natural laws are simply changes in the fundamental powers and liabilities of physical objects not caused by other physical objects in virtue of their powers and liabilities. Hence, if they occur, they cannot be explained scientifically, and so we must look for a personal explanation of the occurrence of violations or quasi-violations—either in the agency of God (for whose existence there is, I claim, much other evidence) or that of some lesser spirit (ghost, poltergeist, demon, or whatever). If there is a God, laws of nature can only be set aside by the action or with the permission of God, who sustains them in operation. Hence, in the absence of positive evidence for the existence of lesser spirits whose action does not depend on the permission of God, the most probable explanation of any violation or quasi-violation is that it was brought about by or with the permission of God. Substantial further reason to suppose that this is the case would be provided by showing that the relevant event was an event which God would have reason to bring about. I shall come shortly to consider what sorts of violations (or quasi-violations) God would have reason to bring about. Any violation or quasi-violation of a law of nature is probably a miracle. (Henceforward in discussion of these issues I shall omit the ‘or quasi-violation’ and ask the reader to read what I have to say about violations as applying also to quasi-violations.)

But how can we learn that an event E of a kind which, if it occurred, would be a violation of natural laws and so probably a miracle, in

fact occurred? For the very fact that if E occurred, it would have been a violation of a natural law, is in itself of course evidence against its occurrence, as Hume classically argued.¹² This is because the past phenomena which make it probable that L is a law of nature make it probable that it holds almost universally and so that on the occasion in question, things conformed to L. But there may be much other evidence that the event E in fact occurred. There are four kinds of evidence about what happened on a particular past occasion. First, each person has his own apparent memory of what happened, what he or she seems to remember. Secondly, we have the testimony of others as to what they seem to remember; and, other things being equal, the more people seem to remember some event, the more probable it is that it occurred. Thirdly, we have traces of the past, physical remains such as footprints, fingerprints, cigarette ash, carbon-14, which allow us, given knowledge of laws of nature (other than L), to retrodict what happened in the past. Knowing that cigarette ash is caused by smoking (or otherwise burning) cigarettes, and very rarely in any other way, we can retrodict from the presence of the ash that previously a cigarette was smoked (or otherwise burnt). Our knowledge of what is a trace of what past state is dependent on our knowledge of laws of nature, and that latter knowledge is ultimately dependent on evidence of memory and testimony, that such-and-such experiments were done and showed such-and-such. Evidence of these three kinds is evidence apparently caused by what happened at the time and place of the purported occurrence, E. It is what I seem to recall about what happened then and there, or what others tell me that they seem to have perceived then and there, or the physical traces apparently caused by what happened there and then. I shall call all this 'the detailed historical evidence' about what happened. For most of us and for most purported violations, the only relevant detailed historical evidence is that of the testimony of others to have observed such violations.

The fourth kind of evidence about what happened is our background evidence about how things behave at other places and times (also of course itself ultimately dependent on strong evidence of the first two kinds), and this may either support or count against what the detailed historical evidence indicates. If our background evidence supports a theory that what the detailed historical evidence indicates is the kind of thing which may be expected to happen (e.g. because that sort of thing

¹² See *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sect. 10.

happens often), then it supports the historical evidence. But it may count heavily against what the historical evidence indicates, and so render the latter overall improbable. If I report that I met a man twelve feet tall, you will be rightly suspicious of my testimony on the ground that men do not normally reach a height of twelve feet. I suggest that it is a basic epistemological principle that, other things being equal, we should believe our apparent memories (that what we seem to remember really did happen) and the testimony of others about what they apparently remember (and so what they claim to have observed which makes probable some claim about what is a physical trace of what, and more generally about what are the laws of nature). Without relying on the first two kinds of historical evidence, we could have virtually no knowledge at all about the world; and surely we do know quite a lot about the world. There are sometimes reasons, however, for not believing our apparent memories of what we perceived or the testimony of others about what they seem to remember. Those reasons will include any reasons we have to suppose that things are not as purportedly remembered; and such reasons may include general background evidence that the sort of thing we seem to have perceived doesn't happen.¹³

Hume supposed that background evidence showing what are the laws of nature would always constitute strong evidence against the truth of any reports based on testimony that some event had occurred which, if it had occurred, would have been a violation of a law of nature. (And if it had occurred to him, he would surely also have supposed that this situation would not in principle be any different if the truth of the reports had been backed up also by his own memories and by physical traces.) Even given Hume's assumption, I see no adequate reason to suppose that background evidence of this kind always outweighs detailed historical evidence. Maybe so many careful witnesses (declared to be such by the testimony of very many authorities) report very clearly what happened that their evidence can outweigh the evidence from the normal operation of laws of nature; and so the balance of evidence might show that a violation of a law of nature had occurred. But Hume's main mistake was to assume that in cases of a purported violation of laws of nature, our evidence about what are the laws of nature is our main relevant

¹³ For a slightly fuller account of the nature and justification of the four kinds of evidence about the occurrence of particular past events, see my *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003), ch. 1; and for a full length account see my *Epistemic Justification* (Clarendon Press, 2001).

background evidence. Background evidence of this kind will inevitably count against the occurrence of a violation. Yet all background evidence about whether there is or is not a God is also crucially relevant. For if there is a God, there exists a being with the power to set aside the laws of nature which he normally sustains; whereas if there is no God, there is far less reason to suppose that violations might sometimes occur. Hume might be right in his view that if evidence about possible violations of laws of nature were the only evidence for or against the existence of God, this evidence would never be sufficient to make such a violation 'a just foundation for any ... system of religion'.¹⁴ But of course, as I have been noting from time to time in this book, evidence about miracles is not the only evidence for or against the existence of God; and all-important among other evidence is the evidence of natural theology.

In so far as other evidence (together with any evidence against the existence of God) makes it overall probable that there is a God, to that extent there is evidence that there exists a being capable of setting aside the laws of nature; and any evidence of my first three kinds that a violation has occurred on a particular occasion is evidence that God has set aside the laws of nature on that occasion. But our evidence will be stronger in so far as we can show that a God has reason on the particular occasion for doing what he does not normally do. Setting aside a law of nature is temporarily no longer sustaining in objects their ordinary powers and liabilities to produce effects, and is acting directly on them to make them produce effects different from those which they produce normally. Setting aside a law of nature is something that God alone can do (or someone else can do with his explicit permission). One reason why God might occasionally set aside a law of nature is to answer a prayer from humans for healing from disease or the satisfaction of some other need, and thereby he would manifest his loving concern for them.¹⁵ The other reason why God might occasionally set aside a law of nature is the reason which I have been considering in this chapter—just occasionally to put his signature on the teaching of some prophet to

¹⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, 10. 2. 98.

¹⁵ It does of course require a theodicy to show why God would allow the normal operation of laws of nature causing disease, etc. in the first place. For my theodicy, see my *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998). Given that, God has reason to set aside these laws occasionally in order to interact with humans (by responding to their prayers). Similarly, any parent has reason to set aside family rules occasionally in order to respond to the requests of children—even if, but for the desirability of responding positively to a child's request (just because it is a child's request), it might not otherwise be the best thing to do.

show that the teaching comes from God. So evidence that a violation occurred in connection with a claim of some prophet to be announcing a revelation from God (which is not too improbable on grounds of content) is evidence that God brought about the violation, and so is further evidence that the purported revelation is genuine. The stronger this evidence, the more probable it is that the purported revelation is genuine. I shall call evidence of the occurrence of an event which, if it occurred as described, would undoubtedly be a miracle—such as a resurrection from the dead—evidence of a super-miracle.

THE TESTS OF CHURCH FIDELITY AND DEVELOPED CONTENT

I argued in the last chapter on pure *a priori* grounds that a public revelation for all humanity would need a church to interpret it: to distinguish between its message and its presuppositions, and to show how it is to be understood in the light of the concerns of new cultures. The church would need to be constituted in a way determined by the original revelation, and in virtue of that constitution have authority to reach conclusions about which interpretations are correct. The controversies of recent centuries have brought this need acutely to our attention. For example, the first chapter of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles taken literally claims that the world (inanimate and animate) was made in six days, and so too does the Koran.¹⁶ The Bible and the Koran are supposed in their respective religions to report or constitute the original final revelation of God to humans. So if the six-day claim is to be taken literally, then it will only be probably true, if the evidence that the Bible (or Koran) is true is stronger than all the scientific evidence assembled by Darwin and so many other subsequent scientists that the coming into existence of the inanimate and animate world took several billion years. That the evidence for the truth of the Bible is as strong as that is—to my mind—a very implausible view. And of course most Christians, and maybe most Jews, and no doubt many Muslims also believe that the coming into existence of the world took several billion years. But that involves taking the original text in a non-literal way; and so if people are to believe things because they have been revealed, there

¹⁶ Sura 10: 3.

must be a system for determining when a non-literal interpretation is correct and when it is not. Again, people at the beginning of the twenty-first century are much concerned about how strictly they should take what these purportedly revealed books have to say about divorce, homosexuality, and other sexual matters. Without a procedure for authenticating an interpretation of what religious books have to say about these issues, there will be no content to there being any revelation of such detailed moral truths.

So the third test of a candidate revelation is whether the original revelation includes a revelation of how an interpreting church is to be constituted, and whether the interpretations given by such a church are plausible as interpretations of that revelation—by their being ‘plausible’ I mean that there is a modest probability that the interpretations are correct. Theologians will offer interpretations, and the church will have to judge between competing interpretations. Theologians can use the principles of Part I to distinguish the record (unwritten or written) of the original revelation from its presuppositions, and to identify analogy and metaphor and different genres. But this will not enable them to answer questions about which the prophet made no explicit statement, or to phrase his teaching in terms of the categories of a new culture. When it becomes necessary to do this, theologians will have to produce a new systematic account of the teaching, from which new consequences will follow.

The prophet’s recorded teaching may contain memorable chunks of oral teaching of various genres—allegories and metaphysical and moral fables, as well as simple moral and theological instruction to be understood in normal senses; and there may be records of actions of his which have symbolic significance (e.g. putting a crown on his or someone else’s head, or damaging the furniture of a temple). The theologian will try to formulate sentences which capture in the categories of the theologian’s own culture the general principles implicit in the prophet’s teaching. This kind of systematizing interpretation is an activity in no way confined to theologians. It is the sort of systematizing which historians of thought do all the time. A politician may have made many speeches about particular political issues. He may have defended legislation making harsh judicial sentences mandatory on the grounds that they lead to widespread observance of the law, and lower taxation of the rich as leading to economic growth which would benefit the poor, and prohibition of smoking in public places. The historian looks for general principles implicit in these and many other speeches, and he may

suggest that the politician is a utilitarian—he believes that legislation should forward the greatest happiness of the greatest number. If the historian comes from a different background from that of the politician, he will try to express those principles by means of his own categories (e.g. ‘maximum expected utility’), which would be unknown to the politician. A philosopher may have tried to express his views as general principles of metaphysics or ethics; but here too there is still plenty of scope for a later historian to express the philosopher’s ideas in ways which relate them to questions being debated at a later time. Kant was a highly systematic philosopher, but he expressed no view on embryo research or genetic therapy; nor can a view on these issues readily be deduced from what he wrote. But it is still sensible to ask: what would Kant have thought about embryo research? A Kantian scholar may find a way of expressing Kant’s moral principles which, perhaps together with some metaphysical principle about the nature of humans which Kant would have accepted, will yield a plausible answer. Thus, although Kant might not have expressed any view about how we should treat humans of different ages, it might be implicit in the examples which he gives of the application of his principle that we should always treat humans as ends and not as means, that he thought that it applied to all humans of all ages and all mental abilities. And he might have expressed a view that when and only when it first becomes conscious is an embryo a human. Then, given that no other Kantian principles apply to this case, it would follow that Kant would have held that there is nothing wrong with research on embryos before they first become conscious, but that it would be wrong after that stage.

The test of any such interpretation of a thinker is whether the general principles put forward by the interpreting historian are simple ones which entail almost all the sentences purportedly written (or uttered) by the thinker (understood in some literal way). That may still leave a few recalcitrant sentences purportedly written by the thinker which are inconsistent with the principles suggested by the interpreting historian. The historian may deal with these sentences in one of three ways. First, he may claim that the thinker must have understood the recalcitrant sentences in a way other than a literal way. Secondly, he may claim that the thinker did not write these sentences—the record is inaccurate. Or thirdly, the historian may claim that his suggested principles fit almost everything the thinker wrote so well that the thinker would have come to deny the statements expressed by the recalcitrant sentences if their incompatibility with his general viewpoint had been pointed out

to him. If there are rival interpretations of a thinker produced in this way, the simplest one, which entails more of the thinker's sentences and is inconsistent with fewer of them (understood in a literal way), is the one most probably true. It may well be contested which among such interpretations is the one most probably true. In such a case we would be right to trust an interpretation by someone who had known the thinker personally. Even if he could not remember particular things which the thinker had said and so add to our database of sentences for interpretation, he would have unconsciously absorbed the thinker's kind of thinking and could help us to choose the correct one among possible interpretations of a sentence.

It is in this way, I shall suggest in Chapter 8, that theologians properly seek to interpret an original revelation, and church councils judge between competing interpretations; and I shall show that this is how Christian theologians have done their work of interpreting certain very central Christian doctrines. If the prophet is supposed to be infallible (e.g. because he was God incarnate), then the third way of dealing with recalcitrant sentences, is not available. And if the record of the prophet's teaching is also supposed to be infallible, the second way of dealing with recalcitrant sentences is also unavailable. This systematizing activity, as well as the prior activity of identifying presuppositions, metaphor, and genre, is an activity which, while ruling out some interpretations, can still leave contested alternative interpretations. This can be seen even in the interpretations produced by historians of the doctrines of highly systematic philosophers such as Kant, who published books proof-read by themselves. Interpretations of the oral teaching of a non-systematic kind recorded by others are inevitably highly contestable. So just as in these circumstances we should trust the interpretation favoured by someone who had known the thinker, so, similarly, for a prophet with a message from God, we need help from someone familiar with the prophet or, better still, with God himself. We need help from God if we are to express in our own categories the prophet's actual teaching, let alone determine principles implicit in the prophet's teaching which have consequences for resolving new disputed issues. So it must be part of a revelation that God will guide his church to discover the correct interpretation of the prophet's teaching from among interpretations which are to some extent plausible. But if the church produces wildly implausible interpretations, that is evidence against the truth of the revelation itself, part of which is that the church is authorized to produce correct interpretations.

So the fourth and final test of a candidate revelation is whether the interpretations of it produced by the church provide the sort of teaching which God would have chosen to give to humans. This means that it must concern the important topics with which, I suggested, the original revelation should be concerned; and that what the interpretation claims should be plausible—that is, not vastly improbable on other grounds. Of course, if the content of the original revelation is not vastly improbable and the interpretations are very probably correct ones, then those interpretations will not be vastly improbable. But there may be issues on which the original revelation (or its written record) has very little to say, or the church may choose as its interpretation of the original revelation one which is less probable (as an interpretation) than other interpretations. In either of these cases, the fourth test is a critical final test which must be satisfied if, on all the evidence taken together, it is to be probable that the revelation is true.

Evidence of the plausibility of the interpretation of the original revelation by the subsequent church, and of that interpretation itself being not too improbable on other grounds, would be reinforced if the promulgation of its message by the later church was confirmed, like the original revelation, by a similar miracle. Indeed, many such miracles—for example, a heavenly voice daily publicly proclaiming its truth in a way evidently violating physical laws—would give it almost overwhelming force. Such an authentication of a revelation would, however, defeat the purpose of a revelation, if my account of that purpose in the previous chapter is correct. The point of a revelation is to provide honest and diligent inquirers with some information, quite likely to be true, about the way to salvation, on which those who seek salvation for themselves can rely. Too much evidence of the truth of a revelation would make the attainment of salvation so easy that it became available to those who had not formed a settled determination to pursue it as their supreme goal. But salvation is so important that there is reason not to give it to those who do not have a settled will to pursue it above all other goals.¹⁷ Some evidence of miracle, minimally of a miracle in connection with the original revelation, is necessary; but overwhelming evidence in the form of successive miracles would defeat the purpose of revelation.

So, if we have a body of teaching purportedly revealed by some prophet as coming from God which satisfies well all four tests, then—in

¹⁷ For argument on this, see my *Faith and Reason*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2005), 204–16.

so far as there is a significant probability on other evidence (e.g. that of natural theology) that there is a God—that makes it probable that the purported revelation is true. Note that there is also a converse relationship. Historical evidence of the occurrence of teaching by a prophet developed by a church, having some significant degree of probability on other evidence, and supported by what significant evidence suggests to be a violation of a law of nature, is evidence additional to that provided by other sources (e.g. natural theology) that there is a God, as a simple analogy will show. If the police have evidence making it to some degree probable that there is a terrorist loose in the community, and so that there will be an explosion, then the occurrence of an explosion is additional evidence that there is a terrorist loose.

NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

Any evidence that one purported revelation is true will be evidence that any incompatible purported revelation (major or minor) is false. The Koran often rejects central elements of Christian doctrine. It rejects the doctrine of the Trinity twice;¹⁸ it rejects the doctrine of the Incarnation (that God became human in Jesus) several times;¹⁹ and it also rejects the doctrine that Jesus died on the Cross—only a ‘likeness’ of Jesus was crucified, claims the Koran.²⁰ So, if the Christian revelation is true, the Islamic one is false; and conversely.

If what I have described are the tests for the genuineness of a revelation, I suggest that, before we ever come to look at the details of its message and method of promulgation, there is, among the so-called great religions of the world, only one serious candidate for having a body of doctrine which is to be believed on the grounds that it is revealed, and that is the Christian Revelation—for only in this case is there any significant evidence of satisfaction of the second test. My point at this stage is not that there is only one serious candidate for being ‘a’ true or even ‘the’ true religion, or even only one serious candidate for having a revelation; only that there is only one serious candidate with a body of doctrine which is to be believed on the grounds that it has been revealed. For satisfaction of the three other tests alone cannot show that all the purportedly revealed doctrine is true. That could only show the truth of such parts of the purported revelation as is made probable (not merely not very improbable)

¹⁸ Suras 4: 168 and 5: 78.

¹⁹ e.g. Sura 5: 19.

²⁰ Sura 4: 155.

by public evidence (other than the teaching of the prophet); and it will be that public evidence which will show the truth of those parts.

Many Eastern religions do not purport to have a revelation. The grounds for believing Buddhism are not supposed to be that the Buddhist message comes from God. Whether or not there is a God is not a central matter for Buddhism, and even if a Buddhist affirms that there is a God, the grounds for believing the Buddhist message (e.g. about the goodness of pursuing the noble eightfold path) are not that it has been revealed by God, but rather its intrinsic plausibility, and that it has been found by wise men in some sense to 'work'. The same goes for the messages of Confucianism and Taoism. Certainly Hinduism often claims that God has become incarnate on various occasions, and revealed certain things about the divine nature and the goodness of certain ways of conduct. But the grounds for believing those things—for instance, the message of the *Bhagavad Gita*—are not that this is a revelation. Rather, the process of inference must go the other way round. The message seems on other grounds to be true, and that is some reason for supposing that it comes from God. My grounds for saying that the process of inference 'must' go the other way round are that Hinduism makes no detailed claim to evidence of revelation other than the content of the message, no appeal to particular historical facts concerning its promulgation which might authenticate the message. And the content of the message concerns not any particular future acts of God, but general truths of a kind on which wise human thinkers might stumble.

By contrast, the three 'Abrahamic' religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) do proclaim that God has revealed certain truths. Judaism claims to proclaim a law (the Mosaic Law) initially revealed on Mount Sinai to a chosen people. Judaism has sometimes made appeal to the details of particular allegedly miraculous events (e.g. the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites escaping from Egypt) as God's authenticating signature on that law. And the survival of the Jewish people through more than three millennia of adverse circumstances is also sometimes adduced as support for the revealed nature of that law. If Judaism does appeal to events of either of these kinds as God's authenticating signature on the revelation to the Jews, I suggest—in anticipation of my discussion of this in Chapter 7—that (whatever the reader concludes from that discussion about the strength of the evidence for the Resurrection of Christ) the evidence in favour of the miraculous nature of either of these kinds of events must be significantly less than the evidence in favour of the miraculous Resurrection of Christ. Such events as the crossing of

the Red Sea happened in times (from our point of view) well covered by the mists of history in comparison with the events in first-century AD Palestine; and even if the former happened as reported, they are far more readily susceptible of non-miraculous explanation than is Christ's Resurrection. (These points concern the force of evidence about these events available to us now. They are compatible with supposing that at some time in the second millennium BC, Jews had very strong evidence of a miraculous crossing of the Red Sea.) And the survival of the Jews through three millennia, remarkable though it is, does not seem to violate any obvious statable law of nature. The appeal of Judaism, like the appeal of the other great religions, must turn on the intrinsic plausibility of its doctrine. But of course, in so far as the content of the Christian Revelation incorporates some of the content of the Jewish revelation, any miraculous evidence in favour of the former will be evidence in favour of the incorporated part of the latter.

A similar point applies even more strongly to Islam. Islam claims very firmly that the Koran is God's revelation to Muhammad and through him to the world. But Muhammad explicitly denied any claim to have wrought a miracle other than the Koran. The Meccans asked, 'if he really was the prophet of God, why did he bring no sign to confirm his statements. Muhammad's answer was that the Koran with its inimitable language was itself the sign he brought.'²¹ The claim that the Koran is 'inimitable' has been advocated on three different grounds: (1) its success; (2) its content, including information which could not have become available to Muhammad, an illiterate prophet, by normal process; and (3) its artistic style.²² The trouble is that we have no plausible cases of natural laws which the success of the Koran, things becoming known to an illiterate, or the production of a new style of writing suitable for conveying religious truth might seem to violate. We have no reason to suspect that illiterate creative genius cannot guess at truths normally accessible only to the literate, or create a new religious style or a successful movement. So there is no strong reason to suppose that any natural law has been violated. We do not know what are the natural possibilities in this area. With Christ's Resurrection it is different; if it happened in anything like the form recorded, it clearly

²¹ A. Guillaume, *Islam*, 2nd edn. (Penguin Books, 1956), 33; see Sura 17: 89–97.

²² On these interpretations of the Koran's 'inimitability', see J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 77–8.

violated natural laws. And Christianity has always appealed (except when we come to some very radical forms of Christianity from the eighteenth century onwards, very untypical of mainstream Christianity) to this second test of miracles, and above all to the miracle of the Resurrection, as evidence of the revealed truth of its doctrines, as I shall illustrate in a later chapter.

I have been arguing that, although God might give us other and less significant public revelations, there is strong reason to expect a major revelation, a revelation through some prophet of a particular kind, concerned with God's own nature, moral truths, and God's plans for our future; but also one making a claim that that prophet was God incarnate and (probably also) that that prophet would by his human life (and death) atone for our sins. So in order for a candidate revelation to satisfy the first test well, there must be significant evidence of a kind to be expected if a prophet taught these things and lived in the required way. We would expect the prophet to found a church which would continue and develop that teaching in plausibly true ways; and to satisfy the third and fourth tests, there must be significant evidence of a kind to be expected if there is such a church. Now not merely is there no other revelation which satisfies the second test in any way nearly as well as does the Christian Revelation, but—I now suggest—there is no other revelation which satisfies the three other tests (taken together) nearly as well as does the Christian Revelation. Other founders of great religions did of course announce revelations about the nature of God and moral truths, and also lived good lives. And they have also founded churches. But neither Moses (or any other prophet of ancient Israel) nor Muhammad claimed to be divine or to be making atonement for human sins. There have certainly been many modern messiahs who have claimed to be divine, but there is no evidence of a kind to be expected if they also satisfied the other requirements—in particular, to all appearances their lives have not been good lives. And neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Koran specify an authority to interpret the original revelation. There has of course been an enormous scribal activity of interpretation in both Judaism and Islam, but no originally dictated or subsequently recognized procedure for determining which interpretations are to be preferred to others.²³ The situation is not too

²³ Thus Waines refers to the absence in Islam of 'a central ecclesiastical body with the powers to debate and legislate on matters of faith and to judge and execute in matters heretical' (*Introduction to Islam*, 51). Oliver Leaman also comments that 'the absence of

clear even in the case of Christianity, as we shall see in Chapter 8, but it is clearer than in Judaism or Islam.

I now proceed in Part III to consider in detail how well the Christian Revelation satisfies my four tests for a genuine major revelation. I shall consider in Chapter 7 how well it satisfies the first two tests. Most of the rest of Part III will be devoted to considering how well it satisfies the third test. I shall consider how well it satisfies the fourth test (developed doctrines having some probability on evidence other than that of revelation) in respect of the central theological doctrines of Christianity only in so far as they are contained in the original revelation (and that very briefly). This is because the subtlety of these doctrines makes this task one for a separate book or books.²⁴ Nor again, because of the size of the task, shall I be able to assess the probability on other grounds of all Christian moral teaching. But I shall consider how probable on other grounds is a significant chunk of controversial Christian moral teaching, and suggest that the result of this limited examination can be generalized to all such teaching. I will also consider how probable on other grounds is the Christian claim for the authority of the Bible—an issue which will turn crucially on how the Bible should be interpreted. Although inevitably inadequate, my examination of these issues will suggest that the Christian Revelation satisfies both the second test and the three other tests (taken together) quite well. Yet the non-existence of any other plausible candidate revelation for satisfying *either* the second test or the three other tests (taken together) nearly as well shows that the *coincidence* of the satisfaction of both sets of tests (even if only to a moderate degree) in one candidate revelation is an extremely unlikely event in the normal course of things—that is, unless someone planned it. The only plausible person with enough power and reason to produce this coincidence about whose existence we have evidence is God. But if the Christian Revelation is not a true revelation, then it would have been deceptive of God to bring about such a coincidence of two significant amounts of evidence favouring the truth of this revelation. It would

a priesthood in Islam meant that the question of which beliefs are heretical and which are acceptable could never be precisely settled'; see his *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31.

²⁴ I discuss the coherence and a priori probability of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in *The Christian God*, and the coherence and a priori probability of a doctrine of the Atonement in *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989). I discuss the historical evidence for the doctrine of the Incarnation in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, and summarize that evidence in Ch. 7 below.

be like leaving someone's fingerprints at the murder scene when they had not committed the murder. In virtue of his perfect goodness, God would not do that sort of thing. If God planned the coincidence in connection with the Christian Revelation, then that revelation is true, and it is very improbable that there would be this coincidence unless God planned it.

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PART III

THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION

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7

The Original Revelation

THE NATURE OF THE ORIGINAL REVELATION

So I turn to examine the content of the (purported) original Christian Revelation, the evidence for its miraculous authentication, and the other evidence for the truth of that content.

The original propositional revelation includes the teaching of God to the Israelites of the centuries BC about himself and his dealings with them and other nations (as recorded in the Old Testament), culminating in the teaching of Jesus Christ, including his teaching about the significance of his actions, and the teaching of the apostles about the nature and significance of these actions.¹ (By the ‘apostles’ I understand the first church leaders, centrally the ‘twelve’ commissioned by Jesus.) The description in Acts 15 of the decision of the ‘apostles and elders’ that much of the law of ritual and sacrifice no longer applied to Gentile converts implies that ‘the apostles and elders’ considered that they had authority directly from God. Their proclamation of this enormous innovation began with the words ‘It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’,² and made no reference to the teaching of Jesus—though they must have thought it consonant with that teaching.

¹ The Council of Trent declared that ‘our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with his own lips this gospel, which had in the past been promised by the prophets in the sacred scriptures’, but it goes on to amplify this by writing that this ‘truth and rule’, i.e. theoretical and moral truth, consisted of things ‘received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the apostles themselves at the inspiration of the holy Spirit’ (Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 663). In subsequent Catholic tradition, see the listing as a Modernist error, in the 1907 decree of the Holy Office *Lamentabili*, the view that revelation was not brought to completion ‘with the apostles’ (H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Herder, 1963), (subsequent references to ‘Denzinger’ are to this edition.) 3421).

² Acts 15: 28. The earlier vision to Peter containing the same message is also represented in Acts 10 as containing a new truth, not mediated by the teaching of Jesus.

Subsequent Christian tradition has included the apostles' teaching (of the kind recorded in New Testament books) as part of the original revelation, while firmly maintaining that revelation came to an end with the death of the last apostle. Such has been the virtually unanimous claim of subsequent Christian tradition (at any rate until the last century); so it is on this original propositional revelation that the enquirer into traditional Christian claims must pass his judgement. No doubt what Jesus did, such as allowing himself to be crucified, was at least as important as, if not more important than, what he taught. But our concern in this book is only with propositional revelation, including propositions stating what Jesus did and what happened to him, and the significance thereof; and the central part of this revelation is clearly the teaching of Jesus himself.

While the revelation includes God's teaching to Israel before Jesus, it includes it only in so far as it was not qualified by Jesus or his apostles. Jesus taught that some of that teaching had been developed in too rigorous a way, and that some of it was only of temporary and limited application. He rejected such ritual 'traditions' as the need to wash hands before eating, and he extended the Old Testament teaching on divorce.³ As I have just noted, the apostles introduced one very radical limitation on the applicability of pre-Christian teaching. And we shall see in a later chapter that the later church, while giving very strong authority to the written documents of the old Israel, the Old Testament, understood some of it in an analogical or metaphorical sense, while denying the literal sense. In all of this, we need to distinguish what was purportedly revealed, from any presuppositions in terms of which the revelation was expressed, and what Jesus and his apostles had to say about other matters; what Jesus said in answer to some question from a passer-by asking him what was the time, or which road leads to Capernaum is not part of revelation.

The reason why I wrote above that the claim of Christians that the original propositional revelation was the teaching of Jesus (as qualified above) was only a 'virtually' unanimous one is that there has been a strain in Protestantism, with its immense reverence for Scripture, to write of Holy Scripture itself as the original revelation; what was given by God was the Bible. But that surely fits very badly with other things that those same Protestants wish to say: for example, that there were Christians in the first four centuries AD. For the books of the New Testament only began to be written twenty years after Christ taught on Earth; many of

³ Mark 7: 1–8; 10: 2–12.

them were not written until twenty or more years later than that; and all the books were put together and recognized as a New Testament in (approximately) final form only in the fourth century AD. If the books themselves were the revelation, how could there be Christians when there were no books?⁴ Holy Scripture must be regarded by Protestants, as it is by Catholics and Orthodox, as no more than a true record of a revelation which existed before it.

SOURCES FOR THE CONTENT OF THE ORIGINAL REVELATION

Although there are a few other minor sources, Christian and non-Christian, by far the most important evidence about the teaching of Jesus and of his apostles after his claimed Resurrection is that contained in the books of the New Testament. These consist of the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of St Paul and letters purportedly written by other apostles, and the Book of Revelation.⁵

I begin with the issue of the genre of these books. As we saw in Part I, sentences have normal meanings, meanings which they must be supposed to have in the absence of contrary evidence. Hence, if a type sentence has as its normal meaning to make a historical claim, we must assume that any particular token is doing this unless we have contrary evidence (e.g. that it is part of a work of fiction). Given that, and the fact that they are in many respects written in a style similar to that of many other letters of the ancient Graeco-Roman world, the genre of many of the 'letters' of St Paul as letters is unquestionable; they are paradigm examples of letters, giving interpretations of the significance of Jesus Christ and instructions for living, where any brief narrative contained within them is intended to be taken as history. The genre

⁴ Papias, in the early second century AD, as quoted by Eusebius, records how he was ever enquiring diligently of those who heard the apostles teach exactly what they said, adding, 'for I do not think that I derived so much benefit from books as from the living voice of those that are still surviving' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3: 39, trans. C. F. Cruse, Bell and Daldy, 1868). Later in the second century, Irenaeus asked, 'How should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be necessary, [in that case,] to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the churches?' (*Adversus haereses*, 3. 4. 1, in *Irenaeus*, i, trans. A. Roberts and W. H. Rambault, T. & T. Clark, 1868).

⁵ This section summarizes ch. 4 of my *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003). See the latter for amplification of the claims made here.

of the other 'letters' of St Paul or other New Testament writers as (purported) letters is also reasonably clear (though they may include also elements of liturgy). The last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, purports to be a vision. The elements of the vision (horses, colours, Babylon, etc.) clearly have great symbolic significance, not all of which is clear to modern readers.

It seems fairly clear that the main body of the Acts of the Apostles is intended to be taken as literal history. It reads like any other contemporary work of history, and the later parts (which contain no reports of anything miraculous) are so detailed and matter of fact as to have a diary-like quality to them. In a number of passages when describing the travels of St Paul, the author speaks of 'we'.⁶ Paul's letters describe events also described in Acts.⁷ Further, it seems evident that Acts is the second part of a two-volume work, of which the first volume is St Luke's Gospel. There is a unity of style and thought between the two works, and the explicit affirmation of its second-volume status at the beginning of Acts.⁸ That opening sentence of Acts describing the 'first book' as being concerned with 'all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning' indicates that the author thought of his earlier work as also basically historical, differing from the later work only in the period of history described by it. The opening sentences of St Luke's Gospel confirm that the author thought of his work as basically a work of history (though, of course, history of cosmic significance). He writes there that he sought to do the same as the many others who 'have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events which have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word'.⁹ The principle that sentences should be interpreted as having their normal meaning in the absence of counter-evidence forces us to suppose that Luke is seeking to record contemporary history, and so that (among other things) he is seeking to tell us what Jesus and his apostles taught. Given that St Matthew's Gospel was written at a similar time to that of Luke and records many of the same events without the slightest hint that anything is to be taken in a non-normal way, we must understand it too as purportedly a basically historical work.

⁶ Acts 16: 10–17; 20: 5–15; 21: 1–18; 27: 1–28: 16.

⁷ See the Council of Jerusalem, described rather impersonally in Acts 15: 1–29 and from a very personal perspective in Gal. 2: 1–10, and the incident of Paul's escape from Damascus (Acts 9: 23–5 and 2 Cor. 11: 32–3).

⁸ Acts 1: 1.

⁹ Luke 1: 1–2.

Both Luke and Matthew obtained much material from Mark. How did Mark intend his Gospel to be understood? It would be very odd indeed if Mark, seeking to tell his readers something, and phrasing his Gospel as a historical narrative and so understood by two near-contemporaries (themselves familiar with other churches, some of whom must have read Mark and could have corrected any obvious misunderstanding of it by Matthew and Luke), was really doing something quite other than trying to record history. This history includes the teaching of Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas, for whose independence from the synoptic tradition (the sources which gave rise to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke) there are strong arguments,¹⁰ contains 114 sayings, some half of which have parallels in the synoptic Gospels, including Mark. Thomas claims that Jesus said these things; and so they are the sort of things that people believed that Jesus said, for reasons other than that Mark said so. So when Mark said that Jesus said these things, there is no reason to suppose that he was doing anything else except claiming that (literally) Jesus said these things. I conclude that the three synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark, and Luke) purport to be history (history of cosmic significance, but, I repeat, history all the same). That is their genre. Note, however, that the conventions of ancient writing allowed a certain looseness in the order in which the author describes events; he is not necessarily saying that the events occurred in the order in which he reports them.¹¹ And those conventions also allow a certain looseness in the way that speech of any length is reported. Hence the speeches in Acts and the hymns described in the infancy narrative (Luke 1: 5–2: 52) as sung cannot be intended as accurate word-for-word reports, but only as giving the essence of what was said or sung. And this makes these works more like historical fables in my sense. (p. 69).

St John's Gospel too is telling us the broadest outline of what happened, since the author records most of the same main incidents as the other Gospels; and on two occasions he affirms solemnly that he or his immediate source were witnesses of the events.¹² However, there are,

¹⁰ See e.g. G. Thiessen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (SCM Press, 1998), 38–40.

¹¹ Papias, as quoted by Eusebius (in the passage referred to in n. 4), quotes a source of his ('the presbyter') who told him that Mark wrote down all that he remembered of the teaching of Peter about the life and teaching of Jesus 'with great accuracy, but not, however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord'.

¹² John 19: 35 and 21: 24.

I think, some stories in this Gospel which the author does not intend to be read as history. It does rather look as if sometimes, at least, St John tells a story simply as a way of setting forward some deep theological truth. One obvious example is the story of Jesus's miracle at the pool of Bethesda.¹³ The implication of the story is that the first invalid to get into the water when it is disturbed is cured. This is supposed to be a regular, predictable event (so not a miracle, on my definition of 'miracle' in Ch. 6) of a most extraordinary kind of which we know absolutely nothing from any other source. The evidence is therefore massively against its having happened. Perhaps John was deceived or is deceiving us. But then we learn that the sick man had been sick for thirty-eight years. The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for thirty-eight years until Joshua (the Hebrew word for Jesus) led them through the River Jordan to the promised land.¹⁴ No one can read St John's Gospel without realizing that symbolism is of immense importance to the author. So, plausibly, this story is just John's way of telling us that Jesus helps the sick in soul through the water of baptism into the Kingdom of Heaven. And fairly clearly John is writing for readers who were already familiar with the incidents recorded in the other Gospels; while reporting the same main incidents, he expresses them in ways which we can only regard as seeking to give the inner meaning of what occurred. Just to take one example, he was obviously familiar with the eucharist, and thought of it as having enormous importance ('unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you'¹⁵); so he must have thought of the eucharist as having been instituted at a certain moment of time. Yet when his Gospel comes to the Last Supper, at the point where the other Gospels record Jesus's words 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood', John recounts the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.¹⁶ He may have omitted the story of the institution because of its obvious familiarity to his readers and (because his book might fall into pagan hands) to avoid increasing the prevalent pagan misunderstanding of the Christian rite as an act of cannibalism. He may also have believed that Jesus did wash his disciples' feet on that occasion. On the other hand, it does rather look as if he is seeking to describe by a story the inner meaning of the institution of the eucharist, as an act of humble generosity—Jesus giving us a share in his very life, and commending his followers to show humble generosity to others. When we come to

¹³ John 5: 2–18.¹⁴ Deut. 2: 14.¹⁵ John 6: 53.¹⁶ John 13: 1–20.

John's reports of the teaching of Jesus, the style and content of teaching which John attributes to Jesus are so different from what the synoptists (clearly more focused on recounting literally true history) attribute to Jesus¹⁷ that we must regard John as putting in his own words what he regarded as the essence of message of Jesus, expressed very differently by Jesus himself in his original teaching. It is in general unclear (except in certain particular cases) how much of what is attributed to Jesus is what John is claiming that Jesus said, and how much is what John took to be (in the light of later events) the inner meaning of what Jesus taught.

In the other Gospels too there are a few details of incidents where we may reasonably suspect the author of 'theologizing'—that is, where he purports to record a deed or remark of Jesus which he does not believe that Jesus did or said in a literal sense, but which, in his view, expresses the essence of what Jesus was doing or teaching. But for all the reasons given previously, we should only suppose this if we have positive evidence that this is what is happening.

The synoptists make clear that much of the public teaching of Jesus was given in parables, and all four Gospels make clear that much of that teaching was given non-verbally by symbolic actions. The Gospels often record that the disciples asked him in private what his parables meant, and he is then reported as having interpreted the parable in private for them. It is not always clear in the absence of more information about the context of their delivery what is the point of these parables; nor are the 'interpretations' always plausible interpretations of what Jesus originally meant by the parable—which suggests that the Gospel writer has put his own interpretation on the parable. But by and large I suggest that we can understand most of the parables. I suggest that some of them are intended as (in the terminology of my Ch. 4) moral fables, others as allegories, and others as metaphysical fables. The parable of the Good Samaritan¹⁸ seems to be a moral fable; Jesus is commanding us to show love to our fellow humans of whatever race or creed, just as the Samaritan showed love to the wounded Jew. This natural interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Luke reports Jesus as ending the conversation centred on the parable with the words 'Go, and do likewise' (i.e. behave like the Samaritan).¹⁹ The parable of the

¹⁷ See E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin Books, 1993), 69–73.

¹⁸ Luke 10: 29–37.

¹⁹ For Augustine (Sermon 171. 2), however, Jesus is the Good Samaritan, and the human race is the wounded man; neither the priest nor the Levite were willing to

Sower²⁰ seems to be an allegory in which the different items correspond to different people or conditions. The sower is Christ, or perhaps any evangelist. The seed is the Gospel. The different kinds of soil are the different kinds of people who react in different ways when they hear the Gospel. And this in essence is the interpretation which Jesus himself is reported to have given (though the Gospel writer gets a bit confused when he describes the different kinds of 'seed' in the ground, not the different kinds of ground, as the different kinds of people). The 'parable of the tares and the wheat',²¹ as told by Jesus according to Matthew's Gospel, seems to me a metaphysical fable and probably also an allegory. A farmer sowed good wheat seed, but while he was asleep an enemy sowed weed seed. When both wheat and weeds appeared, the farmer's servants asked him if they should dig up the weeds; but the farmer said no, because that might uproot the wheat as well. Only at harvest time are they to be separated: the weeds for burning, but the wheat to be gathered into the farmer's barn. Now there is certainly a main point in this parable—the reason why God ('the farmer') does not eliminate evil people is that doing so might damage good people; so this is a metaphysical fable, a story which tells us something of metaphysical importance about the human condition. Matthew, however, reports Jesus as giving a much more detailed allegorical interpretation.²² The enemy is the Devil, the harvest is 'the end of the age', the reapers are angels, and so on. But whether that interpretation is what Jesus intended is disputed.

And then much of the most important teaching of Jesus was done by symbolic acts. 'Acts speak louder than words.' A single statement uttered by Jesus might well be misreported; even if it was repeated many times and reported by different witnesses, there is still *some* risk of misreporting under the pressure of doctrinal bias. But deeds are better remembered, and even if the historian is biased, his bias is more likely to give rise to a biased commentary on what was done rather than a total misreporting of what Jesus did.²³ The Gospel writers all

help him, so there was need of a less obvious saviour. So interpreted, the parable is a metaphysical fable. The modern reader is unlikely to be persuaded by the reasons which Augustine gives for his interpretation.

²⁰ Mark 4: 1–20.

²¹ Matt. 13: 24–30, 36–43.

²² See the various aspects of Jesus's preaching about judgement in Thiessen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 152–70.

²³ This point is well brought out with respect to the Gospels by the fact that the first three Gospel writers feel obliged to record (and John seems to allude to) an incident

agree that Jesus did a number of significant deeds and allowed certain significant things to happen to him; they report these differently, but by and large they all report them. These acts were done among the Jews, whose understanding of their significance was formed by the Old Testament, and especially by the 'Law' and the 'Prophets' within it, and by contemporary thought about it, and thus constituted a non-verbal communication of the kind discussed at the end of Chapter 1. Some acts leave long enduring marks, and anyone who wished to leave a permanent message in an age before television and tape-recorders were invented would have been well advised to use acts as part of his way of doing so.²⁴ These acts include eating with outcasts, feeding the 5,000, overthrowing the tables in the Temple, forming a community of twelve disciples, having a meal with them at which he gave them bread and wine with the words 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood', and that same evening allowing himself to be captured and condemned to death. I shall comment on the meaning of some of these acts shortly.

So I suggest that, with various qualifications, we can know what the various New Testament books are telling us about what Jesus taught. How reliable are they as accounts of what Jesus really taught?

As I claimed in Chapter 6, it is a basic epistemological principle ('the principle of testimony') that if someone tells you that they saw this or heard that, you should believe them in the absence of counter-evidence. (More precisely, someone's testimony that *p*, as such makes it probable that *p*.²⁵) Such counter-evidence might include evidence that the speaker (or writer) was in no position to know what he claims to know, or that other witnesses give incompatible testimony, or that what the speaker (or writer) claims to know never happens. So much of our knowledge of the world depends on our use of the principle of testimony; and it would be

which they must have found embarrassing: the baptism of Jesus by John. This incident must have been embarrassing; for if Jesus needed baptism, did it not follow that he was inferior to John? Hence Matthew reports Jesus as making a remark which seems to rule out that implication (Matt. 3: 13–15). (To say this is not to deny that Jesus may in fact have said the words there reported.)

²⁴ For the view that the life and message of Jesus can best be reconstructed by starting with the acts rather than the words of Jesus, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (SCM Press, 1985). He writes (11–12): 'There are several facts about Jesus' career and its aftermath which can be known beyond doubt.' By contrast, he regards the 'sayings material' as 'having been subject to change in ways that cannot be precisely assessed' (15–16).

²⁵ For development and justification of this principle, see my *Epistemic Justification* (Clarendon Press, 2001), 123–8.

highly arbitrary not to apply it in our assessment of the New Testament. The writers of most of the New Testament books must, given their dates of writing (between twenty and seventy years after the crucial events), have known people who knew eyewitnesses of some of those events. For they were members of local churches, and knew about other churches; and their churches were founded and visited by official and unofficial representatives of more central churches (sometimes bringing from them letters of instruction), the more central churches themselves being founded or indirectly authorized by the apostles. Paul, of course, explicitly claims to have met Peter (whom he calls 'Cephas') over significant periods, and also James, 'the Lord's brother', and other apostles; and Acts confirms such meetings.²⁶ Luke too claimed to have derived his information from eyewitnesses.²⁷ And so does the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who speaks of the message of salvation, 'which was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him'.²⁸

There are of course some discrepancies between various New Testament sources about the details of historical events, and especially about the teaching of Jesus, but in my view no more than is to be expected given the passage of some twenty to seventy years between the events recorded and the recording of them by writers who were at great distances from each other and in no position to sort out any apparent discrepancies by a quick exchange of e-mails. There are also some passages which make much better sense if thought of as containing teaching of the later church than teaching of Jesus himself—for example, the detailed instructions reported by Matthew about procedures for excommunicating church members.²⁹

The major reason for doubting that some of the historical events recorded in the New Testament really happened, and so the truth of the recorded teaching about them, and so—indirectly—for doubting New Testament accounts of the teaching of Jesus, arises from evidence which suggests that they could not have happened since they involve violations of natural laws and so would have been miracles. Jesus is recorded in all the Gospels as having performed many signs and healings (and this activity is depicted as central to his ministry), and even the non-Christian Jewish historian Josephus refers to Jesus as 'a doer of startling deeds'.³⁰

²⁶ e.g. Gal. 1: 18–20; 2: 1–14; Acts 9: 26–7; 15: 4–29.

²⁷ Luke 1: 2–3.

²⁸ Heb. 2: 3.

²⁹ Matt. 18: 15–17.

³⁰ In a version of the 'Testimonium Flavianum' (*Antiquities*, 18. 63–4) which removes any possible Christian insertions.

Some of these signs and healings—if they occurred as described—would probably have been miracles. I shall be arguing in due course that there is good reason to believe that the life of Jesus was culminated by his Resurrection from the dead, which—if it happened—was clearly a great miracle. Given that, there is far less reason to doubt that during his life Jesus performed other miracles, which he would have done in order to manifest God's loving concern for suffering humans. I conclude that there is no good reason for doubting the general reliability of the New Testament accounts of the actions and teaching of Jesus.

It is a bit more evident what the apostles were teaching than what Jesus was teaching; and many New Testament books are a direct source for this. The later church which claimed that the teaching of the apostles was part of revelation counted St Paul as an apostle (in the sense of having authority equal to that of 'the twelve'); and almost all serious scholars consider the major Pauline letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians) certainly to be written by him; and some of the shorter epistles (1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Philippians, Colossians) also to be very probably his work. Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus are probably not his work, but may well be inspired by his teaching. 1 Peter was probably not written by Peter, but again may well be inspired by his teaching. St John's Gospel may not tell us exactly what Jesus said, but it gives us a clear theological picture plausibly deriving from a circle centred on the apostle John, as do the three Johannine epistles, and perhaps the Book of Revelation. But exactly how much of these latter works is owed to apostles is not too clear. And if a few passages of teaching attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are really only the teaching of the apostles, then they count as part of the original revelation under the latter heading.

THE CONTENT OF THE ORIGINAL REVELATION

I now give my own very brief account of the content of that teaching.³¹ It covers the kind of areas which, I argued in Chapter 5, we might expect a revelation to cover. I shall argue that the teaching of Jesus covered five areas, and was developed by the apostles along lines implicit in that teaching. Jesus taught (mainly by non-verbal means) that he was divine,

³¹ This section summarizes my fuller discussion of the content of the teaching of Jesus in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, chs. 5–8.

that his life was an atonement for our sins, and that he was founding a church which had his authority. He gave much teaching about how we ought to live, promised a life in Heaven for the good and warned of permanent alienation from God for the bad.

Despite the fact that the considerable majority of New Testament scholars hold the opposite opinion, I suggest (without invoking the Church's authority, but on the balance of ordinary historical evidence) that Jesus did teach that he was divine. If God was to become incarnate for the purposes I have discussed, he needed to take a human nature (a human way of thinking and acting) and a human body in addition to his divine nature (in the way that the Council of Chalcedon defined in AD 451). This is a pretty complicated concept to get hold of. If Jesus had announced during his earthly ministry 'I am God', this would have been understood as a claim to be a pagan god, a powerful and lustful being who had temporarily occupied a human body (not the all-good source of all being). The well-known Jewish scholar Geza Vermes writes that 'it is no exaggeration to contend that the identification of a contemporary historical figure with God would have been inconceivable to a first-century AD Palestinian Jew'.³² So the failure of Jesus to say 'I am God' during his lifetime is not evidence that he did not believe himself to be God. This is a message which Jesus could begin to proclaim openly only after his crucifixion had made very plain the reality of his humanity, and so the kind of God he would have to have been, and after his Resurrection had provided evidence of his unique status. And there is evidence that he did begin to proclaim this more openly then. St Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus commanding the eleven to baptize 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'.³³ This saying puts 'the Son' (Jesus) on a level with God the Father. Critics, rightly ever on the watch for later interpolations, have, of course, cast grave doubt on the authenticity of this verse; but the manuscript tradition is unanimous, and thus early. Then St John records the explicit confession by the formerly doubting, now convinced, Thomas, of Jesus as 'My Lord and my God',³⁴ a confession which Jesus did not reject. On two post-Resurrection occasions St Matthew's Gospel³⁵ records that the disciples 'worshipped' Jesus; and many ancient manuscripts record a similar 'worship' by the eleven at the end of St Luke's Gospel.³⁶ The New Testament writers regarded 'worship' as appropriate only to

³² Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (SCM Press, 1994), 186.

³³ Matt. 28: 19.

³⁴ John 20: 28.

³⁵ Matt. 28: 9 and 28: 17.

³⁶ Luke 24: 52.

divinity. It is so regarded in several distinct New Testament passages. In Matthew 4: 10 (paralleled in Luke 4: 8) Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6: 13, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him', in response to the Devil's invitation to worship him (the Devil). In Acts 10: 26 Peter stops Cornelius worshipping him with the words 'Stand up: I am only a mortal'. And twice in the Book of Revelation the angel commands 'John' not to worship him with the words 'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you ... Worship God.'³⁷ Jesus, on the other hand, never rejected worship; and St Matthew does record also pre-Resurrection occurrences of worship of Jesus. This evidence is such as we would expect if Jesus was God Incarnate, even if liberal critics claim that it can be accounted for by the Gospel writers reading such claims back into history in the light of the Church's later beliefs.

As Jesus could only claim his divinity explicitly after his Resurrection, and as even then it might not be easily comprehensible by his followers, he would need also to make the claim during his earthly life by means of his actions and by means of teaching in which this claim was contained implicitly, reflection on which could lead his followers after his life was finished to see what he was claiming. And I think that he did claim divinity by his actions and (implicitly) by his words during his earthly life. I shall consider one important example of this, a piece of evidence which critics are much less willing to regard as a later construction. This is the claim that the Jews regarded Jesus as 'blasphemous'. The synoptists explicitly record a comment by the scribes on Jesus's words of forgiveness to the paralytic man, 'It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins, but God alone?'³⁸ Forgiving is a performative utterance (see p. 19): it creates a state of affairs, rather than reports one. Mark and Matthew report that the charge against Jesus before the Sanhedrin was 'blasphemy'.³⁹ Now clearly Jesus did not curse God; so his blasphemy must involve his claiming divine prerogatives. And whether or not you think St John actually records a Jewish comment, he clearly understood their accusation of blasphemy in this way. In John 10 the Jews attempt to stone Jesus, saying 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.'⁴⁰

³⁷ Rev. 19: 10 and 22: 9.

³⁸ Mark 2: 7. Luke 7: 49 records the belief that Jesus forgave sins also on another occasion.

³⁹ Mark 14: 64 and Matt. 26: 65.

⁴⁰ John 10: 33.

Now, according to the synoptic Gospels, two issues were raised at the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas, both relevant to the accusation of blasphemy. Jesus was asked whether he was the Messiah. Claiming to be the Messiah would in itself hardly be arrogating divine prerogatives. But Jesus's quoted response developing the theme of his being Messiah by quoting Daniel 7, 'You will see the Son of Man, seated at the right hand of power', and 'coming with the clouds of Heaven' was claiming a very high kind of Messiahship; and it was to that comment that, according to Mark, Caiaphas responded with 'You have heard his blasphemy.'⁴¹ Now again it is not obvious that even this remark of Jesus is claiming divinity; and critics have claimed that even Jesus's explicit confession of Messiahship at this time was an invention of St Mark.

But the other issue raised at the trial is more interesting, because Mark claims that the witness testimony was false, and so it is hardly his invention. Mark (and Matthew) record that witnesses testified that Jesus said that he would or could destroy the (sanctuary of the) Temple and build it again in three days. To quote the liberal biblical scholar E. P. Sanders again: 'It is hard to imagine a purely fictional origin for the accusation that [Jesus] threatened to destroy the Temple.'⁴² Mark described this accusation as 'false'.⁴³ But probably Mark, and certainly Matthew, who has the same passage, believed that the Temple was destroyed (for they wrote after the time of its destruction in AD 70); and, like the other synoptists, Mark reports elsewhere a further prediction by Jesus of its destruction.⁴⁴ So the falsity of the accusation (in their view) must lie in one of two things: Jesus did not threaten himself to destroy the Temple, but merely predicted that it would be destroyed; and/or he did not promise to build another in three days. But since both Mark and Matthew believed that he did build in three days something else 'not made with hands', which had been destroyed—that is, himself—which, when the Temple was destroyed, they came to regard as a replacement for it, the falsity in their view is more likely to consist in the fact that Jesus did not threaten to destroy the Temple but merely predicted that it would be destroyed. Luke describes Jesus at the time of his Passion as warning the 'daughters of Jerusalem' of a time of disaster,⁴⁵ and Mark, in the chapter preceding the Passion narrative, records Jesus as predicting the destruction of the Temple.⁴⁶ So Jesus indeed predicted the destruction of the Temple—but by another, rather than himself.

⁴¹ Mark 14: 64.⁴² Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 72.⁴³ Mark 14: 57.⁴⁴ Mark 13: 2.⁴⁵ Luke 23: 27–31.⁴⁶ Mark 13: 1–2.

John too quotes Jesus as saying, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'⁴⁷ To replace the divinely instituted worship of the Temple with another kind of worship was clearly God's privilege; and Jesus is not reported as saying that God had commissioned him to do this—he is reported as saying that he would do it himself. And that is a claim to divinity.⁴⁸

As regards the other metaphysical doctrine of later Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity (that God consisted of three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit), it is virtually indisputable that Jesus did not teach this explicitly. We have seen that he could not say 'I am God' before his Resurrection without being badly misunderstood. If Jesus had attempted to teach the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly, the misunderstanding would surely have been even worse. Only when his followers had understood the divinity of Jesus in the right sense would there have been any possibility of their grasping the doctrine of the Trinity, that Jesus was one of three persons who in a sense composed God. So it is no good objection to the claim that Jesus believed this doctrine that he did not teach it explicitly. As with the doctrine of the Incarnation, all he could do was to leave behind plenty of teaching in which this doctrine was contained implicitly which the later church could systematize into the form of the doctrine of the Trinity. And Jesus does seem to have left behind in teaching recorded in all four Gospels two kinds of material which could be used for this purpose. First, while acting so as to imply his divinity, he distinguished himself sharply from God the Father. Luke cites Jesus as saying, 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'; and he addresses God the Father as another person, 'Father'.⁴⁹ And secondly, there is much material in the New Testament about the work of the Holy Spirit, some of which certainly seems to derive from the teaching of Jesus. Mark and Matthew report Jesus at his baptism as having seen the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove;⁵⁰ Luke simply reports that the Spirit did descend.⁵¹ Thereafter, according to all three Gospels, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. The disciples would not have known of the latter unless Jesus

⁴⁷ John 2: 19.

⁴⁸ For fuller discussion of the evidence showing that Jesus taught (mainly by non-verbal means) that he was divine and that he was making atonement for our sins, see my *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, chs. 6 and 7.

⁴⁹ Luke 10: 21–2.

⁵⁰ Mark 1: 10; Matt. 3: 16.

⁵¹ Luke 3: 22.

had told them, and it looks as if the Spirit was recognized at his baptism only by Jesus himself; so he is also the source of their belief about this feature of his baptism. John's Gospel contains a very lengthy passage of teaching attributed to Jesus, about the work which the 'Holy Spirit', whom he called 'the Advocate', will do in the Church after Jesus is no longer among the disciples in bodily form.⁵² And finally, the command of Jesus at the end of St Matthew's Gospel, quoted above, puts 'the Spirit' on a level with the Son and the Father. Although some of this Gospel material may not derive directly from the teaching of Jesus, but rather from the subsequent reflection of the early church, the quantity and distribution (in all four Gospels) of the material does make it fairly probable that Jesus had given some teaching about the Spirit.

My discussion of whether Jesus claimed (implicitly and by his actions) to be divine leads me quickly to the second issue of whether Jesus claimed that his life was an atonement; and on this my views are in much greater agreement with New Testament scholars. The claim of Jesus, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up', which, as we have seen, can hardly be regarded as an invention, constitutes Jesus's claim that he will provide a substitute for Temple sacrifices, which were made in order to achieve atonement for sin. And then there is the Last Supper (the first eucharist), a solemn meal at Passover time, in which Jesus gave to his disciples bread and wine with the words 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood'. Body and blood are the elements of sacrifice. Jesus is telling his disciples that his life is a sacrifice; and so that he is himself the substitute for the Temple. All the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper regard it as a 'new covenant', and they knew that Jeremiah had prophesied a 'new covenant' which he connected with 'the forgiveness of sins'.⁵³ At the beginning of the last week of his life, Jesus had challenged the Jewish authorities in a big way. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey surrounded by cheering crowds shouting slogans which seemed to acknowledge him as Messiah; and then he overthrew the tables in the Temple. He must have realized that such a challenge involved a serious risk to his life. But he took pains to keep out of trouble (not sleeping in Jerusalem, and making arrangements for the Last Supper kept secret from most of the twelve) until after the Last Supper, when he was betrayed. He then allowed himself to be arrested. All the Gospel accounts of the Passion, Jesus's betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion, are keen to emphasize that he voluntarily allowed

⁵² John 14: 25–16: 15.

⁵³ Jer. 31: 31–4.

himself to be taken prisoner under circumstances where death was a likely outcome.⁵⁴ The Gospel writers record the various incidents of the Passion in great detail, and that can only be because they regard those details as of great significance. The details all echo Old Testament acts (and so plausibly ‘fulfil’ them in a wide sense to be considered later), and the central such one is the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, initiated by the original Passover meal and commemorated annually in the Jewish Passover. Jesus died on the Cross either on the day of the Passover or on the day after it, and in the latter case it was the eucharist which was instituted on Passover Day. The Exodus involved an escape from slavery to freedom through the shedding of blood; and the Gospel writers are all telling us that the Crucifixion began an escape from slavery (not to a literal foreign power, but to sinfulness, guilt, and death) to a freedom in the service of God here and hereafter, made possible by the shedding of blood, the voluntary giving of his life by Jesus. Every detail has much significance in this regard. My only point here is that if Jesus allowed himself to be crucified at Passover time after instituting the eucharist, he inevitably proclaimed in the contemporary culture an understanding of it of this kind. And then of course there is the widespread unanimous New Testament consensus, so widespread that it would be unreasonable to suppose that it had no origin in the teaching of Jesus, that Jesus died for our sins.

Thirdly, Jesus by his actions founded a church and taught that he had done so. Jesus appointed twelve ‘apostles’; that there were twelve chief followers is known to many New Testament writings, though the lists of the twelve in the Gospels differ slightly from each other. The old Israel deriving from Abraham had (in the common belief of first-century Jews) twelve tribes deriving from twelve tribe-founding individuals. A Jewish prophet who founded a community based on twelve leaders could only be read as claiming to found a new, re-formed Israel. Further, as already noted, the Gospels report or (in the case of John’s Gospel) acknowledge the institution by Jesus of a ceremony in which he and the original twelve were the first participants, the eucharist. Early Christian communities

⁵⁴ Sanders interprets the ‘overthrowing’ of the tables as a prophecy of the destruction of the Temple, and sees its challenging nature as arising from that; rather than it symbolizing the need for cleansing the worship of the Temple from corruption (*Jesus and Judaism*, chs. 1 and 2). Sanders (332) endorses the view of C. F. D. Moule (*The Origin of Christology*, (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 109) that Jesus ‘did not seek death; he did not go up to Jerusalem in order to die; but he did pursue, with inflexible devotion, a way of truth that inevitably led him to death, and he did not seek to escape’.

were all characterized by the celebration of the eucharist. These two acts⁵⁵ constitute performative actions, more evident and enduring than explicit words, of founding a new, re-formed Israel deriving from the twelve and characterized by a special ceremony. Such a new Israel I shall call a 'church', without intending thereby to beg any questions about whether Jesus supposed that it would absorb the old Israel or come to exist separately from it.

It seems fairly clear also that Jesus appointed Simon Peter as the leader of that church. He gave to Simon the name 'Peter', or (in Aramaic) 'Cephas'. Names stick, and all the New Testament documents know him by his new name and ascribe importance to him. The giving of a name with meaning is, for the writers of the Old Testament and for those learned in it, an act of great significance—it is not the casual attribution of a nickname, which it might be for us. Peter was obviously named by Jesus as the rock on which Jesus founded the Church, the leader of the apostles. Though hesitant, E. P. Sanders is inclined to agree with this, pointing out that 'When the name passed into Greek, sometimes the Aramaic was retained ... but often the word was translated rather than transliterated, thus putting the emphasis on meaning'.⁵⁶ It is of course a matter of acute controversy what kind of leadership Jesus entrusted to Peter. Did he make him an infallible guide and give him unlimited legal authority over the Church, and did he intend that Peter's ability to guide and his legal authority should be inherited by a succession of similar unique leaders of the Church? I shall need to return to these issues briefly in Chapter 8.

I argued in Part II that if God was to give us a unique revelation through some prophet, that prophet must found a church to proclaim and interpret that revelation, and that God must ensure that that church provided (overall and in the end) correct interpretations of that revelation. We would therefore expect that the prophet would say that the church would do this. Jesus clearly intended his church to continue after his crucifixion (and, on the assumption that he believed that he would rise again, after his Resurrection). For he instituted a repeatable ceremony, the eucharist, at his Last Supper when, as his words 'This is my body', 'This is my blood', indicate, he expected that

⁵⁵ Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 11) lists among his 'almost indisputable facts' that 'Jesus called disciples and spoke of there being twelve', and regards (307) the Last Supper as being 'almost equally certain' with one of those facts.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 146.

his earthly life would soon be over. But did he regard that church not merely as commissioned by him, but as guaranteed by God to interpret his teaching correctly?

There are sayings in both Matthew's Gospel and John's Gospel which clearly imply this. Matthew records twice Jesus's words 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven',⁵⁷ once (with singular 'you') addressed to Peter and once (with plural 'you') addressed apparently to the whole body of disciples. These words seem to presuppose that the Church would continue the teaching of Jesus (for otherwise people would be bound in Heaven who were more loyal to the teaching of Jesus than was the Church). And the final sentence of the Gospel contains his promise 'I am with you always to the end of the age'. Luke records Jesus as saying to the seventy disciples whom he sent to be independent witnesses to him for a short period during his earthly life, 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me'.⁵⁸ And in Acts Luke records Jesus after his Resurrection as promising to his apostles the Holy Spirit, in consequence of which they will be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'.⁵⁹ It is not to be expected that Mark's Gospel should contain such a final commission, since—as I shall argue below—its ending has probably been lost.

And there is a lot of teaching ascribed to Jesus in John 14–16 about the continued guidance of the Church by the Spirit after the departure of Jesus. The disciples had already learnt a lot. Addressing the Father, Jesus said: 'The words which you gave to me I have given to them; and they have received them, and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.'⁶⁰ But there was more to come, which simply could not be understood at that time and place: 'I have still many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now.' So there was a need for future guidance: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth'.⁶¹ But the Spirit's witness will be combined with the historical witness of the disciples: 'The Spirit of truth ... will testify on my behalf. You are also to testify because you have been with me from the beginning'.⁶² The Spirit will reinforce the disciples' witness to Christ. And he will help them to remember and understand what Christ did: 'He will teach you everything, and remind

⁵⁷ Matt. 16: 19 and 18: 18.

⁵⁸ Luke 10: 16.

⁵⁹ Acts 1: 8.

⁶⁰ John 17: 8.

⁶¹ John 16: 12–13.

⁶² John 15: 26–7.

you of all that I have said to you.⁶³ And the saying about binding and loosing is repeated (with the plural 'you') in John's Gospel in the form of a saying about forgiving and retaining sins in a post-Resurrection discourse of Jesus in which he confers on the disciples the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴

So in all Gospels (apart from Mark) there is a guarantee of continued guidance of the Church by Jesus by the Spirit; and so, implicitly by God. Now all of this (and especially the three chapters of John which, as we have seen, cannot be regarded as a verbatim account of Jesus's teaching) may simply be the Church putting words into the mouth of Jesus to justify its authority after his departure. But the occurrence of such a final commission in all Gospels (apart from Mark), and its connection in two very different Gospels (Luke and John) with the gift of the Spirit is significant evidence (of modest strength) of the historicity of a final guarantee by Jesus of continued (God-given) guidance of the Church.

Fourthly, Jesus taught people that God loves them, that they should forgive each other and show unlimited love to each other, should worship God, and ask him for good things. It is difficult to interpret the parables of the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Coin,⁶⁵ except as showing (among other things) the love of God for humans; as does the teaching of how God loves us much more than the lilies and the ravens, on whom he also bestows love.⁶⁶ That we should forgive each other 'not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times' is the way Matthew reports Jesus's teaching on forgiveness.⁶⁷ That God is the master who forgives us much and expects us to forgive the lesser debts which we are owed by others is the obvious application of the parable of the Two Servants, drawn out explicitly by Matthew.⁶⁸ This is borne out by the obviously remembered Lord's Prayer, where the disciples were told to pray, 'Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors'⁶⁹—we should forgive others before we can ask God's forgiveness for ourselves. That we should forgive is central to the teaching of Jesus, and manifested in his prayer to the Father from the Cross, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'⁷⁰

Unlimited love is, more than anything else, the theme of the Sermon on the Mount and of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.⁷¹ People are to love their enemies, go the extra mile, lend without expecting a return, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned,

⁶³ John 14: 26.

⁶⁴ John 20: 23.

⁶⁵ Luke 15: 3–32.

⁶⁶ Luke 12: 22–34.

⁶⁷ Matt. 18: 21–2.

⁶⁸ Matt. 18: 21.

⁶⁹ Matt. 6: 12.

⁷⁰ Luke 23: 34.

⁷¹ Matt. 25: 31–46.

etc. Jesus set an example by eating with 'sinners and tax-collectors'.⁷² The observance of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, with a proper attitude of humility before God and avoiding using these as a means of acquiring a good reputation on Earth, are also evident themes of Jesus's teaching; so too are honesty, and thus the avoidance of hypocrisy. Jesus taught people to rely on God to provide good things, mundane and spiritual.⁷³ It is, he taught, more important to show love to those in need than to conform to exact details of ritual. It is not clear, however, how far Jesus is telling his hearers that they have obligations to do all these things, and how far he is merely commending them to do supererogatory acts. He may be commanding us (on God's behalf) to love our enemies and visit the sick and imprisoned; or simply be telling us that these are good things to do, and that unless we do them we cannot expect God to take us to Heaven.⁷⁴

Jesus seems to have commended (or commanded) observing the Jewish Law,⁷⁵ but it is unclear just how important he thought it.⁷⁶

⁷² Mark 2: 15–17.

⁷³ Matt. 6: 2–6, 31–4.

⁷⁴ Matt. 25: 31–46, in teaching that there will be a severe punishment after death for those who do not care for the sick and visit the imprisoned implies that not doing so involves a failure of obligation. Whereas Matt. 19: 16–22 makes a contrast between keeping a limited set of commandments derived from the Old Testament and selling all one's possessions and giving the money to the poor, which alone would lead to 'treasure in Heaven' (where there is no implication that not doing so would lead to severe punishment after death).

⁷⁵ In so far as it was laid down in the Old Testament, that is; e.g. he told a leper whom he had cured to go to a priest and to make the offering specified in the Law (Mark 1: 44).

⁷⁶ See his apparent denial of the importance of keeping the food laws in Mark 7: 15: 'There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' Sanders (*Historical Figure of Jesus*, 219) claims that Jesus is not really denying the importance of the food laws, but merely claiming that it was even more important not to be defiled by 'the things that come out', which Jesus later enumerated as 'fornication, theft, murder' etc. However Mark goes on (7: 18) to report that Jesus said privately to his disciples that 'whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile'. The genuineness of the latter remark is born out by the fact that Mark himself draws the explicit consequence, 'Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean' (7: 19), and does not seek to attribute it explicitly to Jesus. And the fact that, when Matthew uses this passage of Mark, he does not give the same version of the private remark of Jesus, but a marginally more ambiguous version of it, does not seem to me to count significantly against the authenticity of the earlier Marcan version. Certainly Jesus was not campaigning in Galilee for the abolition of the food laws (and hence the privacy of his more explicit comment), but for something larger, which would eventually include the incorporation of Gentiles into the new Israel, which in turn would lead to the conclusion which the Church eventually drew that the food laws were no longer binding. No doubt Jesus did not want his larger message to get obscured by the issue of the abolition of the food laws, just the sort of issue to grab undue public attention.

He did however teach that following himself was more important than observing the Law.⁷⁷ Jesus is not recorded as having said anything in detail on matters relating to the state, such as the morality of war or capital punishment—except to command (or commend) obedience (within limits) to civil authority. In response to the question whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman authorities, Jesus said, ‘Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’⁷⁸ Pay your taxes, but there are limits to Rome’s right to obedience seems to be the message. Jesus is not recorded as having said anything in detail on other issues of personal morality, except to endorse the last six of the Ten Commandments and to say something very specific about divorce. Mark 10: 10–12 (and Luke 16: 18) seems to constitute an absolute ban on divorce; Matthew 5: 32, commenting on the situation of the husband divorcing the wife (the only kind of divorce permitted by Jewish Law) states that the ban on divorce applies except in the case of ‘unchastity’ (*πορνεία*, however that is to be interpreted in this context).⁷⁹

And finally, as many Gospel passages illustrate,⁸⁰ Jesus proclaimed that there would be a ‘Parousia’: that is, the world would come to an end, and God would take the good to himself and banish the wicked from him. Jesus refused to name an exact date when this would happen, but his followers expected it to happen soon. I see no good reason to suppose that in the final days of his life or after his Resurrection (given that he was resurrected) Jesus himself expected the Parousia to happen soon. Jesus’s institution of the eucharist implied his belief in a continuing church organization after his death; and all the remarks attributed to him after his believed Resurrection concern his commissioning his disciples for the non-miraculous task of converting the whole world,⁸¹ a process which would clearly take a long while.

I turn briefly to the teaching of the teaching of the early church as contained in the New Testament, which presumably reflects the

⁷⁷ See, for just one example, Jesus’s words to the disciple who said that he would follow Jesus but must first bury his dead father, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’ (Matt. 8: 22).

⁷⁸ Mark 12: 13–17.

⁷⁹ Mark 10: 19. ‘Except in the case of *πορνεία*’ may mean ‘except in the case of adultery’, as in the Septuagint of Ecclus. 23: 23; but it may mean ‘except where the wife has been shown not to be a virgin on her marriage’.

⁸⁰ Mark 13: 24–7; Matt. 13: 49–50; 25: 31–46.

⁸¹ Matt. 28: 19, Luke 24: 47; Acts 1: 6–7. For full discussion of how soon Jesus expected this ‘Parousia’, see *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 133–7.

teaching of the apostles, on these five areas. There is general agreement that the early church—that is, the apostles—taught that the (life and) death of Jesus constituted an atonement for our sins, that Jesus founded a church, and that there would be a Parousia. (Although the early church believed that this would happen soon, I cannot see that this was part of its official teaching.) The apostles extended church membership to the Gentiles without demanding their circumcision. They must, however, have seen this extension as consistent with the teaching of Jesus. Jesus had confined his own mission to Israel; but, as mentioned above, was regarded by the apostles as having commanded them to undertake a world-wide mission.⁸² They then came to see that this did not involve the circumcision of Gentiles. The Church thus saw itself as commissioned by Jesus to convert and then baptize all humans, and thereby apply to them the benefits of the life and death of Jesus which would remove the guilt of their sins; and as commissioned to continue to apply to its members these benefits through the celebration of the eucharist, and to encourage them to follow the Christian way of life.

The Church from the beginning taught that Jesus was the Christ—that is, the Messiah. But it is disputed how far it acknowledged his divinity. There are certainly New Testament passages which, taken on their own, imply that the apostolic writers or quoted speakers (Paul and Peter) believed that Jesus acquired a semi-divine status at his Resurrection, and so could not be God (for no one can become God; if someone is God, then they have always been God—in the Jewish and subsequent Christian understanding). For example, Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans of Jesus ‘declared to be (*ὁρισθέντος*) Son of God with power’ ‘by resurrection from the dead’.⁸³ But these passages are susceptible of different interpretations: *ὁρισθέντος* may mean ‘recognized as’ rather than ‘made’, although the latter would perhaps be the normal meaning. Yet such passages have to be interpreted in the light of other things Paul wrote: for one example, he writes of Jesus ‘through whom are all things and through whom we exist’⁸⁴ and that ‘though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor’;⁸⁵ and most scholars regard Philippians 2: 6–11 as a pre-Pauline hymn incorporated by Paul into his letter. It speaks of ‘Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being

⁸² See also Matt. 8: 11–12.⁸³ Rom. 1: 4.⁸⁴ 2 Cor. 8: 9.⁸⁵ 1 Cor. 8: 6.

born in human likeness'. Perhaps all one can say is that in the earliest days of the Church quite a few people held a cloudy view that Jesus was divine or semi-divine, and that his divinity was affirmed more clearly by some writers and in some passages than by other writers and in other passages. That Jesus was divine is, however, a view expressed very clearly in the Letter to the Hebrews, in John's Gospel, and in the Book of Revelation.⁸⁶

The New Testament contains further Trinitarian material beyond that reporting or evidently deriving from the teaching of Jesus. The work of the Spirit is seen not merely in the baptism of Jesus and his being driven into the wilderness, but in his conception (in the very different accounts given by Matthew and Luke⁸⁷). Acts records the descent of the Spirit on the Church after the Resurrection,⁸⁸ and says much about the gift of the Spirit being given to Christians by baptism and/or the laying on of hands.⁸⁹ And there is much about the Spirit in Paul's letters and in the Book of Revelation. There are also two or three formulae of a Trinitarian kind, such as the last verse of 2 Corinthians: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.'⁹⁰ But nowhere in the New Testament is there anything resembling the later doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

On the moral teaching, there are certainly plenty of echoes in the apostolic writings of the teaching of Jesus about love and forgiveness. The most striking contrast with the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels is that the letters of Paul and the other New Testament letters are full of detailed instruction about how Christians should live, whereas there is relatively little of that in the Gospels. Paul, like Jesus, taught the duty of obedience to Roman authorities, including the payment of taxes.⁹¹ But his major concern and that of the other authors of New Testament letters was with the details of how Christians should behave towards other individuals. Paul repeats the absolutist teaching of Jesus (as recorded in Mark's Gospel) that all divorce is wrong ('I give this command, not I but the Lord'⁹²). But he ('I and not the Lord') qualifies it for the case where a Christian husband or wife has an unbelieving spouse who leaves him or her—'In such a case the brother

⁸⁶ For fuller discussion, see *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 111–15.

⁸⁷ Matt. 1: 18; Luke 1: 35. ⁸⁸ Acts 2: 4.

⁸⁹ Acts 2: 38; 8: 17, and elsewhere. ⁹⁰ 2 Cor. 13: 13.

⁹¹ Rom. 13: 7. ⁹² 1 Cor. 7: 10–11.

or sister is not bound.⁹³ It is plausible to regard Paul as giving a view about how the teaching of Jesus applied to an issue with which he thought that Jesus had not dealt. The New Testament letters of Paul and others command children to honour and obey parents (the fifth commandment).⁹⁴ They condemn fornication⁹⁵ (i.e. all heterosexual intercourse outside marriage) and performing homosexual acts.⁹⁶ They say that wives should obey husbands,⁹⁷ and that husbands should love and care for wives,⁹⁸ that women should not be public church teachers,⁹⁹ and that women should have long hair and have their heads covered in church.¹⁰⁰ They say that slaves should be good servants of their masters,¹⁰¹ and that masters should treat their slaves fairly and gently.¹⁰² Church members should obey those set in authority over them.¹⁰³ As I wrote, there is relatively little of such detailed moral teaching in the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. However, Jesus may have given more detailed teaching than is recorded there, and there seems nothing incompatible in the detailed teaching of the New Testament letters with the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. The teaching of the apostles also contained historical claims about the life of Jesus: that he led a perfect life under difficult conditions leading to his crucifixion (and without that claim they could not have claimed both that he was divine and that he atoned for our sins), and rose from the dead. So much for my inevitably very brief account of the content of the original revelation, the teaching of Jesus as amplified by the apostles.

My account above of the teaching of Jesus and his apostles was derived from ordinary historical inquiry, treating the New Testament as a source

⁹³ 1 Cor. 7: 15.

⁹⁴ Eph. 6: 1–3. In referring to this as the ‘fifth commandment’ and in other references to any of the Ten Commandments, I am following the way of dividing up the commandments and the consequent numbering of the individual commandments used by the Orthodox, Anglican, and Reformed churches. The Catholic church and the Lutheran church have a slightly different system of numbering.

⁹⁵ 1 Cor. 7: 1–2. Some of the texts condemning *πορνεία* are compatible with a translation of this as denoting a particular kind of sexual intercourse outside marriage (e.g. with a prostitute), but this one is not.

⁹⁶ Rom. 1: 24–7; and, fairly clearly also, 1 Cor. 6: 9–10. That these verses do condemn all homosexual actions is acknowledged even by some Christian thinkers who consider that the Church ought not to condemn these. See e.g. D. O. Via, in D. O. Via and R. A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible* (Fortress Press, 2003), 11–14.

⁹⁷ Eph. 5: 22; Col. 3: 18; 1 Pet. 3: 1; Titus 2: 5.

⁹⁸ Eph. 5: 25; 1 Pet. 3: 7.

⁹⁹ 1 Cor. 14: 34; 1 Tim. 2: 12.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Cor. 11: 2–16.

¹⁰¹ Eph. 6: 5–8; 1 Pet. 2: 18–25; Col. 3: 22–5; 1 Tim. 6: 1–2; Titus 2: 9–10.

¹⁰² Eph. 6: 9; Col. 4: 1.

¹⁰³ 1 Thess. 5: 12–13; 1 Pet. 5: 5; Heb. 13: 17.

of evidence just like any other book, to be tested for its reliability by normal historical tests. But such inquiry can yield only a fairly general and imperfectly warranted account of the content of that teaching. If we are to give much fuller trust to the New Testament accounts, we need a miraculous confirmation of the authority of the later Church in assuring us of the more detailed reliability of the Gospel accounts. It remains the case, however, that even if we had a verbatim record of Jesus's teaching shown to be such beyond reasonable doubt, we would still need a miraculous confirmation of the authority of the Church in order to authenticate the application by it of Jesus's teaching to new situations and its expression in new categories—for the philosophical reason stated in Chapter 5.

THE PRIOR PROBABILITY OF THE ORIGINAL REVELATION

Given evidence of what Jesus and the apostles said, we need evidence that, through Jesus and his apostles, God was speaking. I urged in the last chapter that there would be good reason to believe a claim by a prophet to teach things revealed by God, only if it was not too improbable on other grounds that what the prophet taught is true (my first test for a genuine revelation), and also if there was historical evidence of a miracle brought about by God to authenticate that teaching (my second test).

I argued in Chapter 5 that it was quite probable that God (being perfectly good) might himself become incarnate to identify with our suffering and to make available an atonement for our sins, as well as to reveal truths to us and found a church to continue his teaching. Such an incarnate God would need to live a certain sort of life as a human—a perfect life under difficult conditions, in which he taught that he was God Incarnate and was making atonement for our sins, founded a church, and gave moral teaching of some plausibility. The Gospel picture of the life of Jesus is a picture which even many atheists can recognize as one of a very good life, and there is no reason to suppose it misleading in this respect. And that it ended with his crucifixion is agreed by all serious scholars. The evidence is indeed such as we would expect if Jesus led a perfect life under difficult conditions. There is also, I have claimed, evidence that Jesus taught that he was God Incarnate and was making atonement for our sins, and founded a church. All that constitutes some evidence that he was God, and so that what he

(and the apostles who formed the initial church) taught is true. We have reason to find the teaching of Jesus and the apostles about the church and our future plausible. The extension of church membership to all humans—that is, to all earthly creatures with the capacity for moral awareness and free will—is certainly something which we would expect a perfectly good creator to bring about. He would wish all creatures capable of knowing him and interacting with him to have the opportunity of doing so here and hereafter. It is not contrary to the goodness of God to allow humans to choose how to form their characters, so as eventually to have a character either permanently good or a character permanently bad. If God did not give humans this choice, he would have refused to allow humans to determine their own ultimate fate. But no person with a bad character would be happy with the occupations of Heaven, and God is not going to give them (after their earthly life) the opportunity to indulge their bad desires, and in particular their desires to hurt others. So they will be in a state of frustrated separation from God.¹⁰⁴ But Jesus never said that anyone would get into such a bad state; his concern was to warn them not to do so. There is, however, no reason to deny that he might draw this risky process of giving such significant freedom to humans to a close, which is what the claim that there will be a Parousia amounts to.

The few remarks of Jesus and in writings deriving from the apostles adumbrating the doctrine of the Trinity are hardly precise enough statements to be assessed for truth or falsity. I shall postpone my discussion of the probability on other evidence of the moral teaching of Jesus and his apostles until Chapter 11, when I discuss the moral teaching of the later church. This is for the reason that the latter is based very closely on the former, while the developed doctrines of the Incarnation and especially of the Trinity constitute in some respects a considerable development from the doctrinal teaching of Jesus and his apostles. But if that moral teaching too contains no probable falsity, then it would not be very improbable (on evidence other than evidence provided by the Resurrection and the subsequent history of the Church) that the teaching of Jesus and the apostles together is true. The first test for the Christian Revelation being a true revelation from God, the test of original content, would be satisfied.

¹⁰⁴ For fuller justification of God allowing any humans to be separated from him permanently in such a state, and so to be in effect in Hell, see my *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 197–201.

THE RESURRECTION AS GOD'S AUTHENTICATING SIGNATURE

We do, nevertheless, also need historical evidence of an authenticating signature by God on this teaching in the form of a miracle culminating the life of Jesus. If the Resurrection—the coming to life again of a man dead for thirty-six hours—occurred in more or less the way that various New Testament books claim, then it would undoubtedly be a violation of natural laws; and since it would be very unlikely to occur unless there is a God, it would constitute a super-miracle. I claimed in Chapter 6 that the Old Testament recognizes a prophet as genuine if his teaching is forwarded as a result of such a violation. In bringing to life a prophet killed for teaching certain things, God would have been putting his signature on that teaching. The Letter to the Hebrews claims that the ‘exaltation’ of Jesus completes his atoning sacrifice of himself; and other New Testament passages claim that it is through the Resurrection that forgiveness of sins became available to humans.¹⁰⁵ The early speeches of the apostles, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, emphasize that they witnessed this event and that this was the central justification for their faith.¹⁰⁶ The rest of the New Testament echoes this¹⁰⁷ and stresses the observational basis of the evidence for the Resurrection. And the sub-apostolic age does the same.¹⁰⁸

There is significant detailed historical evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus.¹⁰⁹ If Jesus rose bodily from the dead on the first Easter Day, we would expect two sorts of witness evidence: witnesses who talked with a person whom they took to be Jesus, and witnesses who saw the empty tomb.

On the first, Matthew, Luke, John, and 1 Corinthians provide lists of witnesses who, they claim, talked with Jesus. Acts twice records that Jesus appeared to his disciples for many days after his Resurrection. The earliest text of Mark’s Gospel is generally thought to have ended at 16: 8 with the story of the women finding the empty tomb, and before anyone

¹⁰⁵ For full argument in support of these assertions, see *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, ch. 12.

¹⁰⁶ See Peter’s Pentecost speech, esp. Acts 2: 32; and also Acts 3: 15, 4: 33, etc.

¹⁰⁷ e.g. 1 Cor. 15: 1–11.

¹⁰⁸ See 1 Clement 42 and Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ In the next few pages I summarize the argument of chs. 9–11 of *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*.

met the risen Jesus. (Mark 16: 9–20 is a later addition summarizing what is recorded in other Gospels, primarily Luke.) But the earlier parts of Mark contain three separate predictions of the Resurrection, and Mark 16: 7 reports a ‘young man’ in white predicting an appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Galilee. So Mark certainly believed that Jesus appeared to his disciples after his Resurrection, and to my mind the most probable explanation of why the earliest text we have of the Gospel ended at 16: 8 is that there is a lost ending. The last part of the manuscript was lost, and so what we have in today’s Bible was added by some later scribe to summarize some main appearances of Jesus which the other Gospels recorded.

So there are a lot of reports of individuals, and above all of groups of individuals, seemingly talking to the risen Jesus; and while individuals might imagine things, it would be massively improbable to have joint illusions of Jesus saying the same thing in the course of conversations. You could suppose that the whole Christian community had a programme of deliberate deceit when giving these reports. But not even the average agnostic or atheist would suggest that—in view of what we know about the characters of those involved.

Our main sources do, nevertheless, give somewhat different lists of who saw Jesus where and when; and this is often thought to be a major discrepancy casting doubt on the whole story. But there is a reason for some of the discrepancy: namely, that the writers had different purposes in producing their lists. Priority must go to the list in 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians is the earliest of these sources, written by Paul in about AD 55. (This would be agreed by all serious scholars.) The text has the form of a credal statement, a church-recognized list of ‘witnesses’. Paul repeats it to the Corinthians as what he had told them previously, and what he himself had ‘received’ (apart, that is, presumably, from what he also lists here—Jesus’s appearance to himself). This was that Jesus appeared first to Peter, then to the twelve, then to ‘above five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died’, then to James, and then to all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself ‘as to one untimely born’.¹¹⁰ The implication of the latter phrase is that the appearance to Paul was much later than the other appearances. The ‘then’s’ imply a temporal sequence of appearances. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Galatians¹¹¹ that, three years after his conversion, he spent fifteen days with Peter in Jerusalem, where he also met ‘James, the Lord’s

¹¹⁰ 1 Cor. 15: 1–8.

¹¹¹ Gal. 1: 18–19.

brother', and where he must have heard what Peter and James had to say about the basis of this central Christian message; what he records in 1 Corinthians must have been sensitive to those conversations.

The Gospels, however, all include appearances earlier than the first appearance listed by Paul: Matthew and John include an appearance to Mary Magdalen, and Luke includes an appearance to Cleopas and another disciple. So why don't these occur in the official list? There is an obvious answer. The official list consists of people whom the Jews would take seriously. They would not take women witnesses seriously. (The contemporary Jewish writer Josephus states that Moses prohibited recognizing women as witnesses.¹¹² Cleopas was not a senior church leader, and his companion may well have been his wife, apparently mentioned in John 19: 25 as being present at the Crucifixion.) The Gospels, being written later (when Jewish attitudes had hardened) and being more interested in the historical sequence, put things differently.

And then there is the empty tomb. All four Gospels begin their accounts of the Resurrection with the visit by the women to the tomb, which they found empty. It used to be said that as 1 Corinthians, the earliest source, does not mention the empty tomb, this visit and the tomb being empty were a later invention of the Gospel writers. But even the Jews acknowledged that the tomb was empty. For Matthew 28: 15 records that they claimed that the disciples had stolen the body, which they would not have claimed if they did not believe that the tomb was empty. Why Paul didn't mention it is because he didn't need to. Resurrection for a Jew meant bodily resurrection.

And there is one crucial, largely unrecognized piece of evidence in favour of the women having visited the tomb on the first Easter Day and having found it empty. Christian communities spread out from Jerusalem very quickly—within three or four years of the events of the Passion. They took with them their customs, including the custom of celebrating a eucharist; and all the evidence we have suggests that there was a universal custom of celebrating the eucharist on a Sunday, the first day of the week. This must have antedated the scattering; otherwise we would have heard of disputes about when to celebrate, and some instructions being given from on high (analogous to the way in which disputes about circumcision and eating sacrificial meat were purportedly resolved by the 'Council of Jerusalem' described in Acts

¹¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4, 219.

15). All references in early Christian literature to when the eucharist was celebrated refer to a weekly Sunday celebration. And the one apparent explicit reference in the New Testament to a particular post-Ascension celebration of the eucharist also describes a Sunday celebration. Acts 20: 7 records a 'breaking of bread' on a 'first day of the week'. ('To break bread' was the expression used by St Paul in 1 Corinthians for what Jesus did at the Last Supper, and was always used later as a description of the common Christian meal which included the eucharist.) This verse is one of the 'we' passages in Acts. (See p. 138.) 1 Corinthians 16: 2 implies that Christian communities met together on Sundays; and Revelation 1: 10 calls Sunday 'the Lord's day'.

There are other days on which it might have been more natural for Christians to celebrate the eucharist (e.g. on the day of the original Last Supper—probably a Thursday and certainly not a Sunday—or annually rather than weekly). No such customs are known. There is no plausible origin of the sacredness of Sunday from outside Christianity. There is only one simple explanation of this universal custom, which, I argued, must derive at the latest from the first two or three post-Resurrection years. The eucharist was celebrated on a Sunday (and Sunday had theological significance) from the first years of Christianity because Christians believed that the central Christian event of the Resurrection occurred on a Sunday. Yet such early practice would have included that of the eleven (the twelve minus Judas Iscariot) themselves, and so could only go with a belief of theirs that Christians had seen either the empty tomb or the risen Jesus on the first Easter Sunday. This shows that the visit to the tomb on Easter Sunday was not a late invention read back into history to make sense of the appearances, but a separately authenticated incident.

I conclude that the Christian Revelation satisfies quite well the second test for a genuine revelation, the test of miracle. There is evidence of a kind to be expected if the life and death of Jesus was culminated by a super-miracle which forwarded the teaching of Jesus and his church, and not otherwise. If, of course, as I have urged continually, there is no other reason to suppose that there is a God (with the ability and reason to intervene in history in this way), then the laws of nature are the ultimate determinants of what happens, and—despite all the evidence discussed in this section—the Resurrection of Jesus cannot have happened. But if (as I claim) there is a modest amount of evidence of natural theology that there is a God of the traditional kind who might with modest probability be expected to become incarnate for

the stated reasons and to have his life culminated by a super-miracle such as the Resurrection, then the second test is well satisfied. So, on the assumption that the moral teaching of Jesus and the apostles is not too improbable, consideration of which I have postponed until Chapter 11, the Christian Revelation has been shown to satisfy the first two tests for a genuine revelation. The focus of this book,¹¹³ however, is on whether the Christian Revelation satisfies the third test, the test of church fidelity—whether the subsequent teaching of the Church has been derived by a proper procedure from the original revelation. That is the main issue to be considered in the next four chapters, together with some consideration of whether the developed teaching of the Church is also not very improbable on other grounds (the fourth test). Note that I have argued for the basic historical reliability of the New Testament accounts of the life, teaching, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, and of the teaching of the apostles, by treating the New Testament as one would treat ‘any other book’. But, given my conclusions and other matters to be established in subsequent chapters, it will follow that the Bible (including the New Testament) is quite unlike any other book—it is a divinely authorized record of divine revelation, and Chapter 10 will be devoted to the issue of how this is to be understood.

OTHER KINDS OF JUSTIFICATION

Before turning to this major task, I need to comment on two other kinds of justification (apart from the satisfaction of my four tests) which Christians have adduced for the truth of the Christian Revelation. The first is the argument from prophecy, in the narrow sense of claims that many detailed predictions of the Old Testament about the life of

¹¹³ I repeat that my discussion in this chapter of the extent of the satisfaction by Jesus of the first two tests has been brief, because I have provided a fuller discussion of this in my book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. The focus of the present book is on the third test, which is discussed in *Resurrection* only briefly. What I have called here the satisfaction of the first, third, and fourth tests (taken together) for the Christian Revelation being a genuine revelation corresponds to what I call in *Resurrection* the satisfaction by Jesus of the prior historical criterion for being God Incarnate; and what I have called here the satisfaction of the second test corresponds to what I call in *Resurrection* the satisfaction by Jesus of the posterior historical criterion. The reason for my change of terminology is that I want to isolate here ‘church fidelity’ and ‘developed content’ as providing separate tests, and not to treat them as part of the same test as the test of ‘original content’—that is, the life and teaching of Jesus.

the Messiah proved true of Jesus, and so he was the Messiah and is for that reason to be believed. But in order to assess this argument, we need a criterion for which verses of the Old Testament are to be interpreted as prophecies of a Messiah. One possible criterion is to take those verses which were so understood by their original author. We shall see in Chapter 10, however, that there are many different ways of identifying the 'original author'. The Bible was composed gradually by human writers writing small units, other writers putting together the small units into larger units and adding bits of their own (and so not serving as mere compilers), and yet further writers (again not mere compilers) putting the larger units into the separate books of the Bible, and yet further writers (again not mere compilers) putting these books together into the whole Bible. Each writer using an old unit wrote for a new audience (with different beliefs). And in each case where a text is produced, everything depends on whether the 'author' is the human who wrote down the text, or God who (the Jews believed) authorized him to do so—for God has different beliefs from the human writer. That texts change their meaning in crucial ways when their author and audience change is a point which I made in Chapter 4 and shall hammer home with regard to the way in which the Bible is to be understood in Chapter 10. The 'original author' criterion is too ambiguous to be used. A clearer criterion for which verses are to be understood as prophecies of a Messiah is to take those verses which were so understood in Judaism in the time of Jesus. One reason for using this criterion is that if Jesus set out to 'fulfil' Old Testament prophecies, as he seems sometimes to have done (see below), he presumably wished to be understood by his contemporaries as doing so, and so he would have endeavoured to fulfil them in the way in which they understood them (except in so far as he deliberately sought to transform their understanding of them). So let us consider whether there is a good argument from the fulfilment of prophecy so understood.

First-century Jews certainly regarded some Old Testament verses as prophecies about a Messiah, and sometimes we can see that some verses which they so regarded were fulfilled in Jesus. One example might be Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the 'first Palm Sunday' with cheering crowds, declaring his lordship over the Temple by overthrowing the tables of the money-changers, riding not on a war horse but on a colt, in fulfilment of Zechariah's saying, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on

a colt, the foal of a donkey.’¹¹⁴ Another example might be the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem (which is what the prophecy of Micah¹¹⁵ was understood as claiming for the Messiah)—if, indeed, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And a third example might be the birth of Jesus to a virgin mother (which is what the Septuagint, the available Greek text of Isa. 7: 14 might be understood as claiming for the Messiah)—if, indeed, Jesus was born of a virgin.

But the understanding of such verses as predictions of this very detailed kind involves a belief that God miraculously intervened in history to provide these predictions (or these ways of understanding the verses); for no ordinary reflection on the nature of God or humans could have given the writers this knowledge of the future. Yet there is little historical evidence of miracle to confirm such an intervention to lead the Old Testament writers to record these prophecies, of the kind of strength that there is for the miracle of the Resurrection. You might appeal to the very fact of coincidence between the Old Testament verses and events which happened to Jesus to show that God must have intervened to give the Old Testament writers this foreknowledge. But then the problem is that the events purportedly predicted fall into two groups. Jesus brought about some of these events deliberately in the knowledge of these prophecies, no doubt in order to show that he considered himself the Messiah (e.g. riding on a colt); and then they show that Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah. So they provide no further grounds for supposing that he was the Messiah, for he would have sought to fulfil prophecies about the Messiah whether or not he was the Messiah. The other events are ones about the occurrence of which the independent historical evidence (e.g. evidence which does not rely on the truth of the Christian doctrinal system, and so its authentication of the truth of Scripture) is weak (e.g. the Virgin Birth of Jesus). For evidence of the occurrence of these latter events, you already have to rely on the evidence in the form of the satisfaction of my four tests, including the evidence of the Resurrection, to show that the Christian doctrinal system is true, from which it follows that the Virgin Birth and similar events occurred. Hence the argument from fulfilment of prophecy in this narrow sense will not constitute a good independent argument for the truth of the Christian Revelation.

¹¹⁴ Zech. 9: 9, cited explicitly by both Matthew and John in their accounts of the entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21: 5 and John 12: 15).

¹¹⁵ Mic. 5: 2, cited explicitly at Matt. 2: 6.

There is the further problem that the most important things which the later church believed about Jesus were ones which the first followers of Jesus did not expect would characterize the Messiah; so they could not have had available to them Old Testament prophecies generally interpreted as predicting them. It is agreed by all that the Jews did not expect God to become incarnate, and so could not have expected the Messiah to claim to be God incarnate. And they did not expect the Messiah to be crucified,¹¹⁶ or to rise from the dead. And some of the claims of early Christians that Jesus fulfilled prophecies involved them interpreting the Old Testament in ways which there is no reason to suppose their non-Christian Jewish contemporaries accepted. One well-known example of the latter is St Paul's claim in his Letter to the Galatians¹¹⁷ that the promises recorded in the Book of Genesis as having been made by God to Abraham and his 'seed' were to be construed as having been made to a single individual, and so plausibly to Christ, rather than to many 'seeds'. It is very doubtful indeed whether contemporary Judaism would have seen any difference between 'seed' and 'seeds'. In such a case we cannot have an argument from prophecy, understood as such by criteria independent of the Christian Revelation, to Christ as its fulfilment; and Paul could not either.

Some second-century AD Christian writers, unlike the New Testament writers,¹¹⁸ made their appeal to Christ as the fulfilment of prophecy as their major argument for the truth of the Christian Revelation. But, as we have now seen, that argument will not bear the weight put upon it. The main burden of argument must be the other way round.¹¹⁹ As the *Clementine Recognitions* put it, 'Jesus is not to be believed because the

¹¹⁶ There is only one passage in the whole literature of early Judaism (Old Testament Apocrypha, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls) in which it is stated that the Messiah (called by that name) will die—2 Esdras 7: 29. And this is just a matter-of-fact statement; there is no suggestion that the death would have any exemplary or atoning significance.

¹¹⁷ Gal. 3: 16.

¹¹⁸ Ignatius comments unfavourably on those who rely too much on 'fulfilment of prophecy' for their evidence for the Christian Revelation: 'Certain people declared in my hearing, "Unless I can find a thing in our ancient records, I refuse to believe it in the Gospel"; and when I assured them that it is indeed in the ancient scriptures, they retorted, "That has got to be proved." But for my part, my records are Jesus Christ; for me, the sacrosanct records are His cross and death and resurrection, and the faith that comes through Him. And it is by these, and by the help of your prayers, that I am hoping to be justified' (*Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 8; trans. M. Staniforth in his *Early Christian Writings* (Penguin Books, 1968)).

¹¹⁹ In Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, the dispute between the Christian apologist and the Jew turns on which prophecies are Messianic. Justin considered Isa. 7: 14 to be a

prophets foretold him, but rather the prophets are to be believed to be true prophets because Christ bore witness to them.’¹²⁰ If we follow this approach, St Paul should not be understood as giving an argument from prophecy whose meaning is given by independent criteria. Rather, he should be taken to be assuming that the Old Testament was addressed by God to all people of the first century AD as well as to the Jews of earlier centuries, and to be claiming that it should be understood in the light of what happened in the first century AD. Given that, the heir of the promise to Abraham and his ‘seed’ is most plausibly seen as one individual, namely Jesus Christ, and so the singular ‘seed’ is of crucial importance for understanding the text. For, the claim must be, the text could be properly understood, not by an Old Testament human author or by non-Christian Jews in the first century AD, but only in the light of Jesus by those who knew about Jesus. I shall be arguing in Chapter 10 more generally that biblical texts seen as addressed to people of all centuries can sometimes be understood only in the light of knowledge of what happened at a time many centuries after they were first written. My purpose in anticipating that discussion here is to make the point that while Jesus may well be regarded as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies in all the ways which the New Testament claims, we cannot have an argument to his Messiahship from all of those prophecies interpreted as such by independent criteria. Often, but not always, the way prophecy is to be understood is shown by what happened to Jesus, the Messiah, rather than Jesus being the Messiah being shown by his fulfilment of prophecy. Another example of this is provided by the ‘suffering servant’ passages of Isaiah concerned with one (perhaps one person, perhaps Israel as a whole) whose suffering will bring salvation to Israel and the world,¹²¹ but which do not seem to have been understood as Messianic prophecies by contemporary Judaism. The Passion of Jesus made it right to understand these passages as predictions of the Passion of the Messiah—a reading of them which is a very natural one.

Messianic prophecy, whereas Trypho thought that it was prophesying only the birth of Hezekiah. For this and other illustrations of the point that Christianity determines in large part which prophecies and types are to be taken as Messianic, see J. Barton, ‘Judaism and Christianity: Prophecy and Fulfilment’, *Theology*, 79 (1976), 260–6. For the method of exegesis of the Old Testament practised by Christians in the early Church being unique to them, see also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edn. (A. & C. Black, 1977), 32 and ch. 3.

¹²⁰ *Clementine Recognitions*, 1. 59. The author claims for this remark the authority of the apostle James, the son of Alphaeus.

¹²¹ Isa. 42: 1–4; 49: 1–7; 50: 4–11; 52: 13–53: 12.

Yet in a more general sense of ‘fulfil’ as ‘fill out’, there is good reason for saying that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. There is a strong case for supposing that—whether by natural processes or as a result of a divine intervention into those processes—ancient Israel achieved a deeper understanding of the nature of God and of human needs and morality than that achieved by any other culture apart from those cultures, such as Christian cultures, which inherited its insights. Jesus filled out this understanding abundantly. Also, he claimed to provide other things for which so many writers of the Old Testament (at different stages of its production) inchoately longed: the triumph (or at least the beginning of the triumph) of good over evil, adequate atonement for sins, and the hope of Heaven. In claiming to provide these things, Jesus showed by some of his actions that he regarded himself as the ‘new’ and greater Moses, Elijah and others¹²² that is, he regarded himself as ‘fulfilling’ their role in a larger way. And it is the major theme of the Letter to the Hebrews that Jesus made available that atonement for sin which it was the purpose of the sacrifices laid down in the Old Testament Law to provide, but which the Old Testament prophets emphasized that those sacrifices were unable to provide. The author of that letter draws strikingly to our attention the many similarities between the details of the Passion of Jesus and the detailed sacrificial requirements of the Old Testament. So, the author reasonably claims, by Jesus’s chosen way of life and by the Passion which he allowed himself to undergo, Jesus sought to fulfil the aim of the old sacrifices. As I noted in Chapter 4, Old Testament people and their actions are regarded by the New Testament writers as historical ‘types’ of Jesus and his actions. The fact that Jesus made these claims to fulfil the roles of Moses and Elijah in a larger way and to fulfil the aims of the old sacrifices is part of our evidence for the satisfaction of my first test for a true revelation. But to have good grounds for supposing that Jesus did in fact fulfil the roles of Moses and Elijah in a larger way and in fact fulfil the aim of the old sacrifices, we need further evidence that the Christian Revelation satisfied first test (e.g. in the respect that Jesus claimed divinity) and evidence that the other tests were also satisfied.

The other strain of apologetic justification for the Gospel message, if one can call it that, which has secured undue influence at later stages of Christian history is the claim of many Protestants that Scripture

¹²² See the transfiguration (Matt. 7: 1–13), and the feeding of the 5,000 (e.g. Mark 6: 35–44) as a magnified repetition of Elisha’s feeding of the 100 (2 Kgs. 4: 42–4).

wears its truth on its face. Calvin wrote that ‘Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.’¹²³ And he would attribute our seeing that evident truth to the work of God the Holy Spirit—as did the Westminster Confession when it taught that ‘our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of Holy Scripture] is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness, by and with the word in our hearts’.¹²⁴ Now if someone really does see something as overwhelmingly obvious, then indeed he ought to believe and live by what he ‘sees’.¹²⁵ But, as I shall emphasize in Chapter 10, it is very far from obvious how certain parts of the Bible are to be understood—we need a context to make the meaning of the sentences clear—and different readers to whom the truth of Scripture has seemed evident have understood it to mean very different things. Very few parts of the Bible seem to claim either ‘self-evident’ authority, or indeed even to be the immediate ‘word of the Lord’.¹²⁶ Rather, most parts of the Bible claim to provide grounds for belief about the acts and words of God, which are the true vehicles of revelation. And finally, of course, much of Scripture has not seemed self-evident to so many of its readers; argument is needed to show how it is to be understood, and why it is to be believed. Those to whom Scripture seems ‘self-evident’ are well advised to reflect on these facts before reaffirming their conviction that its truth needs no argument.

So I turn to an examination of how well the purported Christian Revelation satisfies the third and fourth tests for a genuine revelation.

¹²³ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (Westminster Press, 1960), 1. 7. 2.

¹²⁴ Ch. 1. 5, in J. Pelikan and V. Hotchkiss, *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2003), ii. 607. (Subsequent references to ‘Pelikan and Hotchkiss’ are to this work.)

¹²⁵ That we should believe what seems overwhelmingly obvious (despite a substantial amount of counter-evidence) follows from what I have called the Principle of Credulity. See my discussion of this principle in my *Epistemic Justification*, 139–51.

¹²⁶ See Barton, *People of the Book* (SCM press, 1988), 45 f.

8

The Church

The main concern of the next few chapters is with how well the Christian Revelation satisfies the third test for a genuine revelation: whether there is a church founded by Jesus with a certain organization which provides plausible interpretations of the original revelation—plausible as interpretations, that is. From its foundation, the Christian Church saw itself as having many aims: to convert, to baptize the converted and thereby to bring to them the remission of their sins won by the life and death of Jesus, to comfort and strengthen the faithful in their pursuit of the Christian way, and above all to worship God, especially by celebrating the eucharist and thereby reincorporating the faithful regularly into the scheme of salvation. But among its aims, and necessary for pursuit of the other aims, is to interpret the original revelation to later generations with their presuppositions and their interests. For to convert people to some belief, you have to be able to expound that belief in terms which they understand; and to teach people to follow the Christian way, you have to be able to explain how to do that in different circumstances. But the word is ‘interpret’. If the Church had become the vehicle of new revelation, then there would no longer be an ‘original revelation’ whose meaning and consequences Church members could tease out by argument and experience and interpret for the benefit of other cultures, and many of the advantages alleged for a revelation in Chapter 5 would not be available. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant alike have always maintained that the most that the Christian Church can do is to interpret the original revelation.¹

Over the past two millennia, mainstream Christianity has split like an amoeba so often; and new ecclesial bodies have arisen, claiming to be the whole or part of the true Church, but teaching different doctrines

¹ Hence all labelled Montanism as a heresy. This second-century movement claimed that the Spirit had given new teaching to prophets, additional to that of Scripture and church tradition. See e.g. J. Tixeront, *History of Dogmas*, i (B. Herder, 1930), 192–9.

from each other as giving the true meaning of the original revelation. In this chapter I consider the criteria by which we can determine which one or more ecclesial bodies is the whole or part of the Church which Jesus founded, which I call 'the apostolic church'. I shall then go on in subsequent chapters to consider how to understand the doctrines which it teaches and to some extent to consider whether they are such as to enable the Church to pass the fourth test, that it does not teach doctrines which are very improbable on other evidence.

IDENTITY OF SOCIETIES

The criteria which we use for determining when some earthly society is the same society as an original society may help us to see which if any ecclesial body (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, etc.) is the whole or part of the society which Jesus founded. For all societies of humans, states or clubs, businesses or sports teams, a later society being the same society as an original society is a matter of it having sufficient connectedness and continuity² with the earlier society in two respects: aims and organization. Connectedness is a matter of the features of the later society being largely the same as those of the original society; continuity is a matter of there being a society at each intermediate time preserving connectedness with the original society, and preserving strong connectedness with each society close to it in time. Put a bit more loosely, any changes in its aims and organization must be limited and gradual. I illustrate, first, connectedness and continuity of aim. To be the same chess club as an earlier one, you have to continue to play chess; and to be the Oxford college founded in the fourteenth century, you have to do the same job—teaching and research—as it did. This is connectedness. But there also has to be continuity over the interval in the pursuit of the aim. If after the earlier period the society decided no longer to play chess and to play football instead, even if it reverted to playing chess again some decades later, it would no longer be the same society. But if it changed the rules of its game to ones somewhat different from those of the original game, we might consider it the same society—so long as any rule changes were gradual. We might say that the rules of chess used to be somewhat different from the present

² For the source of these concepts of 'connectedness' and 'continuity', and for the source of my concept 'best candidate' used later in this section, of see Additional Note D.

rules, rather than that it is now playing a new game—‘draughts’ and no longer ‘chess’. But connectedness and continuity of aim are not enough. If the college became bankrupt and sold its buildings to an American university which set up an Oxford campus teaching much the same subjects as the original college, the American university campus would still not be the college founded in the fourteenth century—it would simply be a different society doing the same job in the same place. For sameness we also need connectedness and continuity of organization, as well as of aim. What that will amount to will depend on the way in which the original society was organized. Let us consider a chess club which has a constitution adopted at a general meeting when it was formed. The constitution lays down how the committee and officers are to be elected, new members admitted, and present members excluded; and also makes provision for how the constitution itself can be changed (e.g. how the club can agree to have different club offices, whose officers are elected by different procedures). Then a later club is the same as an earlier club, by this criterion, if its committee and officers are elected by the same procedures as those of the original club, or by new procedures adopted after following duly the procedures for constitutional change laid down in the original constitution; and if the club consists of members who fulfil the requirements of the original constitution or a properly amended constitution for being members. If these procedures are followed to the letter, there will be total connectedness. Yet no written constitution can foresee every eventuality, and circumstances may arise for which it contains no clear provision. Maybe the constitution says that all elections of the committee must be held at a general meeting convened by a committee member, with fourteen days’ notice of the meeting being given to every member of the club. But one year the meeting to elect the committee was held after only twelve days’ notice. Does the chess club still continue to exist? Surely yes, even though there has been some lack of connectedness of organization. Or suppose that all committee members are killed simultaneously in a road accident. If a non-committee member then convenes the general meeting at which most members of the original club are present and which elects a new committee, is it the same chess club? Our intuitions are, I think, again to say yes. There are ways of continuing contrary to a constitution which nevertheless constitute sufficient connectedness of organization. Not all societies have written constitutions, at any rate to begin with. (Constitution writing often occurs at a later stage of their history.) In that case there may be an ‘unwritten constitution’ in the sense that

all of those who were evidently much involved in the organization could give an enquirer a roughly similar account of what were the procedures for making decisions. But organizations exist even before that stage is reached. And then one may say that there is connectedness of organization if officers, committee, and membership, etc. are in fact chosen in somewhat the same ways (even if the members have not given any thought to what these ways are).

And there is continuity of organization over time if at each intermediate time there is connectedness with the original society, and any changes are gradual. Suppose that the procedures for electing club officers have not been followed in minor ways on each of a number of occasions over several decades, and that on each occasion almost all the club members tacitly allowed a hitherto unconstitutional procedure to be used in future. Suppose that, in consequence, fifty years later rather different procedures are in operation from those used fifty years earlier. We would still think of the club as the same club. Contrast this with a situation in which all these irregularities occurred on the same occasion, and a very different procedure from the original procedure was used on the next occasion. Here we would be far more inclined to say that the old club had ceased to exist and a new one had been formed. All such connectedness and continuity is a matter of degree. There will be clear cases of connectedness and continuity, clear cases of their absence, and a wide border area in which there will be no true answer as to whether connectedness and continuity have been preserved, both in respect of aim and of organization.

What is evident, however, is that if there is a clear 'best candidate', well ahead of other candidates in exhibiting adequate connectedness and continuity with the original society, then no other society can be (the same society as) the original society. Suppose that a society S_2 exists today with connectedness and continuity of organization and aims with those of an original society S_1 100 years ago (although with marginally different aims, and with a somewhat different constitution reached by a change whose legality was dubious). Now a few members of the public greatly admiring the original society form a society S_3 with exactly the same aims and constitution as S_1 . Which society, S_2 or S_3 , is the same society as S_1 ? Clearly S_2 is, since S_3 is totally lacking in continuity with S_1 .

The most difficult issues as to which subsequent society is the original society arise when the original society splits. If the split results in one society which does and one society which does not have somewhat

similar organization and aims to those of the original society and substantial continuity therewith, then it is clear what to say: the former is the old society, the latter is not. But splits often result from a difference of interpretation of the rules of organization (written or unwritten) and different understandings of the aims. Here there may be a clear answer as to which has the greater amount of connectedness and continuity (one evident to non-members), but there may not be. One resultant society may revert to the original constitution (which had been changed gradually in an illegal way) in all its detail, while the other society preserves continuity of organization much more obviously. Or one society may satisfy the organization criterion better, while the other more obviously conforms to the original aims. Here the only thing to say is that the original society has split into two societies, neither of which is *the* original society; only together do they constitute that, and they are not now functioning properly as that society. And I suggest that we would say the same if one resultant society preserves the aims and organization only marginally better than does the other resultant society.

TWIN CRITERIA FOR THE CHURCH

I argued in Chapter 7 that Jesus founded a church, and that there is some evidence that he claimed (as one would expect him to claim if he was founding a church to carry a divine message to new cultures) that it would be guided by God in teaching his teaching. Clearly he commissioned twelve apostles, and gave them a leader—Peter. So the Church began with a primitive organization. In founding an earthly society, Jesus must have understood something along the lines set out in the previous section as necessary for its identity over time. The old Israel of the first century AD being the same society as the nomadic community of twelve tribes led by Moses out of Egypt was a matter of connectedness of organization (including, centrally in its case, sameness of race) and of aim (including the worship of God, and so teaching doctrine about him). It was also a matter of continuity of organization (despite the establishment of a monarchy and the introduction of centralized worship with the building of the Temple in the eleventh century BC) and continuity of its aim (despite some gradual change of doctrine: e.g. developing beliefs in the coming of a Messiah and in life after death). In founding a society based on twelve apostles, Jesus Christ was clearly intending to found a society

with similar public criteria for being that society. St Paul's talk of the 'body' of Christ of which individual Christians are made members by their baptism,³ and St John's talk in the Book of Revelation of the names of the twelve apostles as written on the twelve foundations of the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem, when the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are written on the gates of the city,⁴ both thereby emphasize the public, organized nature of the Church.

The vast majority of Christian ecclesial bodies have an ancestry deriving from the church of the twelve apostles. Relatively seldom have groups of non-church members come together to form a church; all the major Christian ecclesial bodies have arisen as the result of a split in an existing body. 'Catholics', 'Nestorians,' and 'monophysites' separated in the fifth century when the two latter groups rejected the definition of the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 about the two natures of Christ (divine and human). The Eastern and the Western Catholic church separated into 'Orthodox' and 'Roman Catholic' in the eleventh century; Roman Catholic and many of the Protestant denominations separated in the sixteenth century; and innumerable greater and lesser splits have occurred in Christian history (as well as also a few amalgamations). Across almost every split there has been significant continuity of aim, including teaching substantially the same doctrine between successor bodies and the original body. After the Reformation, Protestants continued to confess the central Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement confessed by the Western medieval Catholic church. Also, there has usually been *some* continuity of organization across the split: for instance, there were ministers of religion, worship on Sundays, baptisms and eucharists in both successor communities as in the previous Church, before and after the Catholic/Protestant split; and the same goes for most other major divisions in Christian history. The similarities between the major Christian ecclesial bodies must strike an outsider as far greater than any differences.

But, all that said, the teaching of different Christian ecclesial bodies does differ. So how can an enquirer tell which ecclesial body provides the correct interpretation of the original revelation? If my analogy with earthly societies is justified, it will be that ecclesial body which is the same church as the church of the apostles, for it is—I have argued—to that body that God entrusted his revelation and in which he provides some

³ e.g. 1 Cor. 12: 12–31.

⁴ Rev. 21: 12–14.

guarantee of its availability. That body will be the one, if there is one, which clearly satisfies best the criteria of connectedness and continuity of aim and organization with the apostolic church. Connectedness and continuity of aim are largely determined by connectedness and continuity of doctrine. As I have noted, the Church has many aims; but its doctrine determines how it should pursue these aims. It must worship, convert, and inspire acts of charity. But what and how it should worship depends on its doctrine; what conversion amounts to also depends on the doctrine to which someone is being converted. And to show charity to someone, you need a doctrine of what constitutes a person's well-being. Admittedly, a body which had a true doctrine about how it should pursue these aims, but did not bother to pursue the aims, could hardly claim to be the Church. A body which had forgotten to worship, to convert, or to inspire acts of charity for two centuries could not be the body which Christ founded, whatever it 'taught'. But it is most unlikely that a society could teach its members about the importance of worship, yet not bother to worship. And similarly for the other aims. Most ecclesial bodies have applied most central elements of their doctrine, albeit with much half-heartedness. The differences between such bodies arising from doctrine turn little on whether doctrine is applied; rather, the various differences are determined by the details of what that doctrine is.

Clearly, if God guarantees that his church will teach what the apostolic church taught, interpreted and applied to a new culture in the right way, then necessarily the later church will teach quite a lot of what the apostolic church taught. Hence any evidence at all (e.g. from the continuity of its organization) that some later body is the apostolic church will be evidence that it teaches much of what the apostolic church taught. So, in order to keep our criteria distinct, I shall understand by a later body having connectedness of doctrine with the apostolic church, it being shown by normal historical criteria that what was taught at different periods was the same doctrine. The limited amount of historical information which we have about the teaching of the apostolic church (summarized in Ch. 7) will not always enable us to answer questions about which ecclesial body did or did not teach in some respect what the apostolic church taught. Sometimes, however, I think that we are in a position to answer such questions, and so to rule out some ecclesial body as no part of the Church, on the grounds that it does not satisfy the criterion of connectedness of doctrine at all well. Similarly, I shall understand by a later body having continuity of

doctrine with a previous ecclesial body, and so ultimately back to the apostolic church, that it teaches doctrine shown by normal historical criteria to be properly derived from the doctrine of the previous body, and ultimately back to the apostolic church (with which throughout its history it preserves significant connectedness of doctrine). Hence any legitimate doctrinal developments will be gradual ones, preserving overall the content of the original revelation.

By connectedness and continuity of doctrine I understand connectedness and continuity of those doctrines regarded as essential components of the Christian faith. As we shall see, both Catholics and Orthodox consider that certain bodies (Popes or Councils) who define doctrines under certain conditions are infallible. Hence 'belief in' these doctrines is made a condition for church membership. But other doctrines never so defined have been regarded by these bodies as equally central; and some ecclesial bodies do not think of themselves as 'infallible', and so do not use this word in connection with the doctrines which they regard as central. So I suggest the need for a wider category of 'all-important' doctrine, disagreement with which is treated as seriously as is disagreement with doctrines purportedly defined infallibly. But, as I shall illustrate later, on an Orthodox view, and even on a Catholic view, some authority declaring a view infallible is not sufficient to make it infallible; certain conditions need to be satisfied, and it takes time to show that they are satisfied. So we need to add that a doctrine being all-important must be a matter of the way it is treated over a significant period of time. So I shall say that an ecclesial body treats a doctrine as all-important if it consistently treats it as infallibly defined, or consistently deems any member of the body who denies it so heretical as to expel him or her (not merely ban them from teaching), or would have done so if the occasion had arisen. 'Consistently' is to mean over a significant period of time; whether a period of time is 'significant' is of course vague, but a practice which lasted for several centuries would certainly count as operating for a significant period of time. If Jesus founded a church to interpret his revelation to all cultures and centuries, it cannot abandon doctrines taught as all-important for many centuries. For that would involve claiming that there wasn't a church for many centuries whose interpretations of revelation could be trusted. And it requires considerable careful historical judgement to reach a conclusion about whether some body would have expelled someone for denying some view when that view was not a matter of controversy. But despite its vagueness and the difficulties of applying it, we need this notion of an

'all-important' doctrine, since all ecclesial bodies who believe that the Church has a revelation to proclaim inevitably have a view about what is the undeniable core of that revelation.

It follows that a body whose doctrine is wildly out of line with the teaching of all earlier Christian bodies cannot be part of the Church. For if the Church is the vehicle of revelation, it is the vehicle of revelation for the third and fourth and fourteenth centuries, as well as the twentieth century. And a twentieth-century 'Gospel' which bore no relation to a fourth- or fourteenth-century Gospel could not claim for it the authority of a first-century revelation mediated through the Church. True, given that part of the purpose of a revelation is to give believers something to sort out for themselves, the abandonment of previous views on matters not treated (so far) as all-important is to be expected; and perhaps the abandonment of one isolated doctrine or set of doctrines regarded as all-important is still compatible with there having been a revelation, since the Church's interpretations might still be generally reliable. But the overthrow of a major part of long-held past doctrine regarded as all-important could be achieved only by denying that the fact of any other doctrine being taught by the Church was strong evidence of its truth; and to deny that is to deny that revelation provides access to doctrinal truth.

However, several ecclesial bodies can claim both significant connectedness and continuity of doctrine with that of the apostolic church (without being open to the charge of abandoning past doctrines regarded as all-important), but still their later doctrines differ significantly—hence, despite the contrary Protestant view,⁵ the need for the organization criterion to help discriminate between them. Connectedness of organization is a matter of a later ecclesial body being shown by normal historical criteria to have similar organization to the apostolic church. Continuity of organization with a previous ecclesial body, and so back to the apostolic church, is a matter of any change of organization being explicitly authorized by the previously organized church; or being gradual and preserving substantial connectedness with the apostolic church.

⁵ Thus Luther: 'Where God's word is purely taught, there is the upright and true church; for the true church is supported by the Holy Ghost, not by succession of inheritance' (*Table Talk*, §370, trans. W. Hazlitt (H. G. Bohn, 1857)). Luther held that despite the medieval Church teaching things contrary to Scripture, God had miraculously preserved it in a distorted form through its period of 'Babylonian Captivity' to false doctrine.

Church organization is a matter of admission procedures (e.g. baptism), kinds of worship (e.g. the eucharist), who conducts the worship (e.g. episcopally ordained priests), how officers are appointed (e.g. elected by the congregation, or appointed by the Pope), and how they are installed (e.g. whether bishops are consecrated by bishops or by congregations), and by whom interpretations of doctrine are worked out and proclaimed. At its beginning the Church did not have a written constitution, and any dispute about whether (on normal historical evidence) a later body had the same organization as the church of the apostles is likely to be even more difficult to resolve than a dispute of the same kind about doctrine. But there can be strong evidence that some ecclesial body of a period of history subsequent to the third century fails badly on the criterion of continuity of organization. A new society of people who came together in the nineteenth century out of an interest in applying the teachings of Jesus but did not result from any breakaway from a previous society cannot be part of the Church. Yet in many cases of schism it is not obvious which subsequent body has greater continuity of organization with the previous church. In cases where, as far as we can judge, two bodies satisfy the organization criteria equally well, we may be able to use the two doctrine criteria to discriminate between them; and conversely. Together these two pairs of criteria should get us a long way towards answering the question of which ecclesial body today (if there is a unique such body) is the Church which Jesus founded, and so towards discovering the content of the Christian Revelation.

It might turn out, however, that two or more ecclesial bodies satisfy the criteria roughly equally well. One might satisfy the doctrine criteria better, while another satisfies the organization criteria better; or one might show better connectedness of both doctrine and organization, while another shows better continuity of both; or there are various other ways in which there can be equal overall satisfaction of the twin criteria by two ecclesial bodies. In that case we must say, as I suggested that we should say about an ordinary earthly society in the same situation, that the Church is divided and cannot function properly. Ancient Israel was in this situation for the two centuries when it divided into two kingdoms, the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah. In such a situation the Church as a whole will be teaching as all-important revealed doctrines only those doctrines which all the bodies agree to be all-important.

The twin criteria for an ecclesial body being the Church, and so for the reliability of its interpretations of doctrine, were well recognized

early in Christian history. At the end of the second century Irenaeus claimed that the Church, 'although dispersed throughout the whole world ... has received from the apostles and their disciples' the same body of doctrine, which he then spells out.⁶ He claims that there is a uniform body of doctrine held by churches throughout the world. In view of the controversies dividing professing Christians in his day (to which Irenaeus's own writings draw our attention), he must be using the organization criteria as partial criteria for the identity of the church—that is, for a local church belonging to 'the Church'. At the beginning of the third century Origen drew attention to the importance both of connectedness with the original revelation and of the need to develop the original revelation. He wrote that 'that only is to be believed as the truth which in no way conflicts with the tradition of the Church and the apostles'. He acknowledged that 'many of those who profess to believe in Christ hold conflicting opinions not only on small and trivial questions but also on some that are great and important', but claimed that 'the teaching of the Church, handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles, is still preserved and continues to exist in the churches up to the present day'. While holding that the apostles delivered the essential doctrines of the faith, he comments that on many matters the truth had not yet been discovered. For example, while the apostles taught the essential doctrines, they did not give the grounds for those doctrines. These 'they left to be investigated by such as should merit the higher gifts of the Spirit'. Also, there were many questions about the content of Christian doctrine to which the answers were 'not yet clearly known'—for example, whether the Holy Spirit was 'begotten or unbegotten'. He foresees it as a task for the future to construct out of the apostolic teaching 'a connected body of doctrine'.⁷

Early theologians also regarded satisfaction of the organizational test as essential for church identity, and so for the truth of an interpretation of doctrine. Ignatius of Antioch insisted that the unity of a local church was provided by its bishop: 'whatever has [the bishop's] sanction can be sure of God's approval'.⁸ Irenaeus and Origen both emphasized the importance of a local church being headed by priests (presbyters)

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1. 10. 1.

⁷ Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface, Latin text, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Harper & Row, 1966), my italics. Origen may have written in Greek 'created or uncreated', rather than 'begotten or unbegotten', which appears in the Latin text translated by Rufinus.

⁸ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8, trans. M. Staniforth, in *Early Christian Writings*.

obedient to a local bishop who has succeeded another bishop until, ultimately, we reach a bishop whose authority derives from an apostle. Irenaeus wrote: 'It is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father. But [it is also incumbent] to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession ... as heretics ... or as schismatics ... or as hypocrites ... for all these have fallen from the truth.'⁹ And, as I quoted earlier, Origen claimed that the teaching of the church has been 'handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles'. But even if the organization criterion was satisfied, satisfaction of the doctrine criterion—that is, connectedness and continuity of doctrine with the apostolic church—was recognized as a crucial independent test for the truth of doctrine, and so the identity of the Church, by Christians on both sides of various church divisions. Consider the Arian controversy. Arians held that the Son (the second person of the Trinity, incarnate in Jesus) was 'of similar essence to the Father', while the 'Catholics', the eventual victors, claimed that he was 'of the same essence as the Father'. Bishops and their followers on each side of the controversy broke communion with bishops and their followers on the other side, while each side recognized that church organization had been preserved (bishops had been validly elected and consecrated) on the other side.

Having distinguished these two criteria, I now proceed to examine each in turn more thoroughly. What constitutes connectedness in each case is evident—connectedness of doctrine and organization is just having (or, more precisely, being shown by normal historical criteria to have) the same doctrine and organization as the apostolic church. But what constitutes continuity? Which developments are legitimate, and which are not? Clearly if the Church is merely the interpreter of the original revelation, then continuity of doctrine must consist in any new statement of doctrine being properly derived from the original revelation; it must bring out something implicit in that revelation. And although historical evidence such as that discussed in Chapter 7 can show us to some extent what was the content of that revelation, it cannot show us very much in detail. But it can show us that Jesus founded a church to continue his work, and so God's signature in the form of the

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4. 26. 2.

Resurrection on the teaching of Jesus (including the teaching that God would guide that church) implies that we must take what it claimed to have been the content of that revelation to be indeed the content thereof. This content is called 'the deposit of faith'.

THE DEPOSIT OF FAITH

For all Christians, Scripture (i.e. the Bible) forms the core of the deposit of faith. It is a record of the original revelation. For Protestants (and also for many Orthodox—see later), there is nothing else to the deposit of faith except Scripture. It contains a complete record of all the revealed teaching of Jesus and his apostles (including the teaching of the Old Testament approved by Jesus), and what cannot be derived from Scripture is no part of revelation. Yet what determined that certain books and not others belong to Scripture?

The rabbis came to agree on which books constituted the Old Testament around AD 100; but why should the Christian Church take their list? The rabbis included in the canon of Scripture only books originally written in Hebrew. From the fourth century onward the Church in the West included as canonical also the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha (originally written in Greek), while at the Reformation Protestants again relegated these to a secondary place as suitable for 'example of life and instruction of manners' but not 'to establish any doctrine'.¹⁰ The Eastern Church, while also eventually including the Old Testament Apocrypha as canonical,¹¹ regarded the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the non-Apocryphal part of the Old Testament (made in Alexandria c.200 BC), as the canonical version of the latter. There are passages in the Septuagint which have some small differences in meaning from that of the best translations of the Hebrew text.

¹⁰ Article 6 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.

¹¹ For an account of how the Christian canon of the Old Testament came to include the Apocrypha, see H. F. D. Sparks, 'Jerome as Biblical Scholar' in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, i (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 532–5. As late as the eighth century, the leading theologian of the Eastern Church, St John of Damascus (*De fide orthodoxa*, 4.17, trans. S. D. F. Salmon, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 9 (James Parker and Co., 1899)), did not accept the Old Testament Apocrypha as canonical. He describes Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon as 'virtuous and noble', but states that they 'are not counted nor were they placed in the ark'.

For the first four Christian centuries, some Christians had very different views as to the limits of New Testament Scripture from those which eventually prevailed. Gradually, by the end of the first century three and then four Gospels and many of St Paul's letters came to be recognized as canonical. However, Marcion in the middle of the second century AD campaigned for a Scripture consisting only of ten Pauline letters and an expurgated version of St Luke's Gospel, and no other books of New or Old Testaments. This restrictive view came quickly to be rejected, and the other books of our present New Testament came to be recognized as canonical, while some other books which nearly acquired canonical status came to be rejected. The first official list of the books of the New Testament produced by any significant authority which coincides with the one in today's Bibles was the list contained in the Festal Letter of AD 367 of St Athanasius as Bishop of Alexandria to the Egyptian churches and monasteries of his diocese. Although the Church (Western and Eastern) thereafter adopted more or less the same list, it was still many centuries before the Eastern Church adopted exactly the same list as the Western Church. According to one tabulation, even in the tenth century AD there were no fewer than six different lists of Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments approved by some authority in the East.

Why did Christians eventually adopt one list rather than any other one? In his book *The Canon of the New Testament* Bruce Metzger¹² analyses the three criteria which led church bodies to recognize some book as New Testament Scripture—its conformity with basic Christian tradition, its apostolicity (being written by an apostle or someone closely connected with an apostle), and its widespread acceptance by the Church at large. The ancient document which exhibits most clearly the first two criteria at work is a short work written in the latter part of the second century known as the Muratorian Canon. After listing thirteen Pauline letters which he regards as genuine, the author rejects two works that promote the Marcionite heresy which he says have been falsely attributed to Paul, because 'it is not fitting that gall be mixed with honey'. He also rejects the *Shepherd of Hermas*, because although the work 'ought indeed to be read', it was composed, 'very recently, in our own times'; and so was not an apostolic work. The

¹² See B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1987), esp. 251–4. My paragraph summarizes these pages of his book; the references and translation which I give are his.

third criterion—that any given church ought to recognize a work as scripture, because most others do—is manifest in many later writings. Augustine had something approaching a calculus for applying this third criterion. He wrote that:

among the canonical Scriptures [the most skilful interpreter] will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all, he will prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority, to such as are held by the smaller number and those of less authority. If, however, he shall find that some books are held by the greater number of churches, and others by the churches of greater authority (though this is not a very likely thing to happen), I think that in such a case the authority on the two sides is to be looked upon as equal.¹³

Like Augustine, Jerome had his doubts about who was the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, but he wrote that this did not matter, for ‘in any case it is the work of a church writer (*ecclesiastici viri*) and is constantly read in the churches’.¹⁴

The first two of Metzger’s criteria are criteria of connectedness with the original revelation; and the third criterion is the criterion of the recognition of this connectedness by other parts of the church established as such by the criteria discussed earlier (including the organizational criterion). The authority of Scripture thus derives, claimed the early church, from its recognition by the church, identified as such by the organizational criterion as well as by connectedness and continuity of doctrine in other respects—that is, that by normal historical inquiry Scripture was a record of the teaching of Jesus and his apostles and of the teaching which they approved (the Old Testament).

There is a Classical Protestant position to which I referred in the last chapter—that the authority of Scripture is its self-evidence. For the reasons given there, that is hardly a plausible position.¹⁵ The only

¹³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.12, trans. S. D. Salmon, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, ix, (T. & T. Clark, 1883).

¹⁴ Cited in Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 236.

¹⁵ Even when the list of books forming the New Testament has been agreed, it remains a matter of dispute whether certain passages of books—e.g. John 7: 53–8: 11 or 2 Esdras 7: 36–105—belong to those books, and so to the Bible. Those who dispute these matters seem to me not always clear about what criteria they are using. John 7: 53–8: 11 is omitted from some modern versions of the Bible on the grounds that it is ‘not to be found in most ancient manuscripts’ of St John’s Gospel. Maybe, but many books of the Bible are compilations of passages which previously existed separately. Why omit this passage alone on the grounds of it having a separate origin? It would be more

plausible Protestant position must be that the Church early recognized the New Testament as expressing the Gospel, and the Old Testament as qualified by the New, and thereafter submitted its doctrinal authority to Scripture. But, as we have just seen, 'early' can at best be construed as 'by the fourth century'. What is to count as the Church for the purpose of authenticating Scripture must be established by other criteria; and these, I suggest, are the ones which I have analysed.

Protestants have always insisted that once there was a canon of Scripture, that was the sole deposit of faith; many recent Orthodox theologians also hold that view,¹⁶ and so did some late medieval Catholic theologians.¹⁷ However, St Basil of Caesarea, a theologian regarded with enormous reverence by the Orthodox, held the view that there are unwritten traditions from which doctrine can be derived, and other later Orthodox theologians held the same.¹⁸ And the Roman Catholic church of the last five centuries has also taught this.¹⁹ The fact of considerable patristic and medieval support for this latter view gives

relevant to omit it on the grounds that by the time that St John's Gospel was recognized as canonical by the whole Church at the end of the second century, most MSS of that Gospel still did not include that passage. This latter is probably so, but by no means certainly. See C. K. Barrett, 'The Woman Taken in Adultery', in *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 2nd edn. (SPCK, 1978), 589–92.

¹⁶ See A. Nichols, *From Newman to Congar* (T. & T. Clark, 1990), Appendix, 'The Idea of Doctrinal Development in Eastern Orthodox Theology'.

¹⁷ See A. E. McGrath, *Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), ch. 5. Duns Scotus, among others, taught the sufficiency of Holy Scripture for the genesis of Christian doctrine—see *Ordinatio*, Prologus, pt. 2, q. 1.

¹⁸ St Basil wrote that 'time would fail me if I attempt to recount the unwritten mysteries of the church' (*On the Holy Spirit*, 27. 67). Although the sample list of mysteries which he does recount are all mysteries of liturgical practice (e.g. signing a catechumen with the sign of the cross, and blessing the water of baptism and the oil of chrismation before their use), he argues that doctrine can be derived from liturgical practice. He makes this assertion in the course of arguing that if the divinity of the Holy Spirit were not explicitly stated in Scripture, that would not suffice to dismiss it as not an essential part of the Catholic faith. For the divinity of the Spirit, he argues, is clearly implicit in the words used by the Church when catechumens are baptized. The Second Council of Nicaea (AD 787) anathematized anyone who 'rejects any written or unwritten tradition of the church'. It clearly had in mind a tradition of practice, venerating icons; but if that tradition is a proper one, then there is at least this true doctrine that that practice is good. And Metrophanes Critopoulos, Patriarch of Alexandria, in his Confession of Faith (AD 1625), one of the important 'confessions' of Orthodox leaders of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, wrote: 'The word of God is divided into the written and the unwritten' (trans. in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, ii. 512).

¹⁹ The Council of Trent stated that the revelation was contained both 'in written books and in traditions unwritten' (Tanner, 663). The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the double source of revelation, claiming that the Church's certainty about

it some plausibility; and there is no a priori reason to suppose that the books subsequently canonized as Scripture contained every item which Jesus revealed. But in order to be justified in deriving a doctrine from an 'unwritten tradition,' someone needs to produce some evidence of the existence of that tradition from apostolic times. We do not have very much evidence about the beliefs and practices of the church of the first two centuries, except what we can infer retrospectively as an explanation of its later beliefs and practices. But we do know plenty about the beliefs and practices of the church of the third and fourth centuries. And so, I suggest, if some doctrine cannot be shown to be implicit in beliefs and practices widespread throughout the Church in the third and fourth centuries, that must count very substantially against its being an 'unwritten tradition' from which later doctrine can be derived.

However, it seems highly implausible to me to confine the role of the Church in the interpretation of revelation to that of validating the canon of Scripture. Anyone knowing nothing about the history of Christianity reading the Bible could hardly get anywhere constructing anything like the creeds of the Church, which Christians have regarded for most of the Church's history as summaries of their faith. It labours the obvious to point out how many and diverse have been the interpretations of Scripture since the Reformation on central matters of faith, even by those aware of the history of the Church. The diversity of interpretations which could be produced by those unaware of that history defies imagination. Suppose that Christianity had been eliminated in the persecutions of the early centuries AD, and that the last Christian martyr had buried the last copy of the Bible in the sands of Egypt; but that copy had been found again in the twentieth century, and various persons impressed by its teaching had tried to construct Christian doctrine therefrom, how could they even have begun? If the arguments of Chapter 5 for the need of an interpreting Church have any worth, that need could hardly have been superseded by the promulgation of the canon of Scripture. And, as I shall illustrate shortly, the process of deriving the central doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation involved the elaboration of central biblical texts in terms of a subtle metaphysic by church leaders educated in a tradition of worship and exegesis; even so considerable diversities of views remained, which could only be resolved by church decisions (of Councils or Popes).

the faith 'is not drawn from holy scripture alone; both scripture and tradition are to be accepted and honoured with like devotion and reverence' (Tanner, 975).

PROPER DERIVATION FROM THE DEPOSIT

There are differences among those who believe that doctrine should be 'derived' from the original deposit of faith, about what proper derivation involves. These differences exist within as well as between ecclesial bodies, and have seldom, if ever, been themselves the subject of official doctrinal definition.

Aquinas held that the content of later doctrinal definitions is contained 'implicitly' in what has gone before,²⁰ but the issue is just what 'implicitly' involves. At one extreme is the view of Bossuet and other French Roman Catholics of the seventeenth century that new statements of doctrine could only be restatements of the deposit of faith, perhaps in different words but with the same meaning. They held that 'the Christian religion came from its Lord complete and perfect',²¹ in the form of unwritten traditions which the biblical authors and the Fathers gradually committed to writing, which then constituted the deposit of faith. The Church never made up her mind, never discovered anything, merely put it into new and clearer words. Jansen apparently remarked that 'theology was an affair of the memory, not of the reasoning faculty'.²² This view does seem very implausible as an account of what has happened to Christian doctrine in the centuries after the Fathers wrote. It does look as if Christian bodies of the later centuries were doing rather more in their doctrinal definitions than rephrase the teachings of the Bible, or even of the Bible and the Fathers.

A more common view is the view that proper derivation from the deposit of faith consists in deducing consequences from it. (An inference from premisses to conclusion is a valid deductive inference, i.e. constitutes a logical entailment, if someone asserting the premisses but denying the conclusion would be contradicting himself. It just draws out the consequences of what is already there. Much inference in science, history, and ordinary life, however, is not deductive, but ampliative, in going beyond the premisses—to a merely probable conclusion, or at any rate one whose probability is increased by the premisses. The latter type of inference is inductive inference.) Duns Scotus seems to

²⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 1.7.

²¹ Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 2nd edn., (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5.

²² *Ibid.* 7.

have advocated that legitimate derivation consists in deduction, when he wrote that 'Many essential truths are not expounded in sacred Scripture, although they are contained there implicitly (*virtualiter*), just as conclusions are contained in premisses (*principia*).'²³ This is a more plausible view than that of Bossuet, for, as all philosophers know well, deductions of any length and complexity can often yield new and surprising conclusions—as when a surprising mathematical theorem is deduced from familiar premisses—and thus it is better able to account for the apparent development of Christian doctrine over two millennia.

The Jesuits of the Spanish Counter-Reformation tried to spell out in detail what the 'deduction' view amounted to, and different Jesuits gave different accounts of the matter.²⁴ Their accounts all assume that deductive reasoning is always syllogistic reasoning: that is, that premisses and conclusion are in the form of universal ('all *As* are *B*') or particular ('some *As* are *B*' or 'a [*name*] is *B*') statements; and that all reasoning can be analysed as reasoning from two premisses to a conclusion. Suarez's account is as follows. There is revelation of two kinds: formal and virtual. A statement is formally revealed if (1) it is contained in Scripture, or (2) it is officially promulgated by the Church, or (3) it can be deduced from Scripture or official promulgations of the Church, or (4) it can be deduced from a universal revealed statement (of one of the former kinds) and a particular statement known by 'natural reason'. Under (1) it is allowable that the statement be expressed in words other than those found in Scripture. Thus, Suarez writes that 'God being infinite or incorporeal are sufficiently (*satis*) immediately revealed in Scripture, if not in the same words, at any rate in equivalent ones.'²⁵ Under (3), Suarez claimed, the definition of the Council of Chalcedon that 'in Christ were two natures, human and divine' could be deduced from two revealed premisses: (a) 'God was in Christ', and (b) 'Christ was human'.²⁶ 'Known by natural reason' was so understood as to include everything known without recourse to revelation. So under (4), from the revealed universal premiss 'Every human correctly baptized (when there is no impediment) is justified' (i.e. is regarded by God as guiltless),

²³ Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Prologus 2. 123.

²⁴ For a general account of their controversies, see Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, ch. 2.

²⁵ F. Suarez, *De fide*, disp. 3. 11. 12.

²⁶ The example is taken from Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 26–7. The revealed premisses were themselves, the claim would be, rephrasings of such biblical statements as those to be quoted on pp. 196–8 below.

and the particular premiss given by 'natural reason,' 'This infant has been correctly baptized,' we can derive 'This infant is justified'²⁷ (since the only possible impediment—that the person being baptized does not have the requisite beliefs—would not arise for an infant). However, if the universal premiss is one of natural reason—for instance, 'Every human can smile', then when conjoined to the particular revealed premiss 'Christ is human' to yield 'Christ can smile', the conclusion is not formally revealed; the revelation is merely virtual.²⁸ Why this difference arising from whether the premiss of natural reason is universal or particular? Suarez's answer is that such universal statements known by natural reason are not known as certainly as are particular statements. Suarez goes on from here to claim that what is formally revealed is *de fide*, whether or not the Church has yet declared it to be so; whereas what is virtually revealed is not *de fide*, until the Church declares it to be so.²⁹ So the only way in which the Church's derivation adds to the sum of doctrine to be believed was when it promulgated some statement deduced from a universal premiss given by natural reason and a particular premiss given by faith. Only if the Church were to promulgate it as a doctrine would 'Christ can smile' become a doctrine imposed on believers. But doctrines formally revealed are doctrines already requiring assent, before the Church declares them to be such. The way in which Suarez applied his distinctions might perhaps yield the result that while Christ having two natures, human and divine (the definition of the Council of Chalcedon), was formally revealed, that Christ had two wills, one human and one divine, was only virtually revealed (because derivable from the Chalcedonian definition only with the aid of the universal premiss 'all natures include wills'), and so not *de fide* until declared to be so by the Third Council of Constantinople.³⁰

Other Jesuits in Counter-Reformation Spain diverged from Suarez in different directions. Vasquez held that any inference from one revealed premiss and one premiss given by natural reason was *de fide*, even if the revealed premiss was not universal. Molina contended that those conclusions which Suarez called 'virtually revealed' were not revealed at all, but did become morally certain when the Church declared them.

Clearly, if any of these accounts of revelation are even to begin to have some appeal, they have to be phrased so as to allow that not all deduction has the form of a syllogism. All contemporary logicians recognize that

²⁷ Suarez, *De fide*, disp. 3. 11. 5.

²⁸ Ibid. 3. 11. 5.

²⁹ Ibid. 3. 11. 11.

³⁰ See Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 32.

much deductive inference is non-syllogistic in form; and since the end of the nineteenth century deductive logic has captured many other forms of deductive inference. So an account of which premisses of natural reason can play a role in the deduction will have to be given in more general terms. We could therefore replace the three Jesuit theories by theories phrased in terms of deducibility (whether syllogistic or not) from revealed premisses and premisses of natural reason, the latter being distinguished no longer by their universal or particular form, but instead by the kind of certainty they have.

But the whole enterprise seems a misguided one. It is to be expected that some of the Church's interpretations of the original revelation would not be deductions from 'the deposit of faith'. For the purpose of the interpretations is to express the original revelation in terms of new categories of thought (e.g. in terms of Greek philosophy), and to apply them to new situations. I outlined in Chapter 6 the procedures for expressing the thought of some secular thinker in terms which he did not use himself, which would enable new consequences to be derived from it. The simplest general account of the thinker's principles which entails almost all the sentences (understood in a literal way) purportedly written or uttered by the thinker is an account of his principles which is most probably true. If this leaves any recalcitrant sentences uttered by the thinker which (when understood in a literal way) are inconsistent with the suggested principles, they must be treated in one of three ways. First, we may claim that the thinker must have understood the recalcitrant sentences in a way other than a literal way. Secondly, we may claim that the thinker did not write these sentences—the record is inaccurate. Or thirdly, we may claim that his suggested principles fit almost everything the thinker wrote so well that the thinker would have come to deny the statements expressed by the recalcitrant sentences if their incompatibility with his general viewpoint had been pointed out to him. When we are concerned with the teaching of Jesus (and of the apostolic church which he founded), a prophet who claims to be announcing a revelation from God, then the third way of dealing with recalcitrant sentences is not available. Human thinkers may be inconsistent at times, but God cannot be. It might be that the record of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles is occasionally imperfect, and we must allow for that possibility. But clearly, by the arguments of Part II, if God provides a revelation, he must provide an accurate enough account of it for his church to derive correct interpretations. So we may need to interpret the sentences of the 'deposit of faith' in ways other

than literal or any established ways, and in particular metaphorically. When we are systematizing the sayings of Jesus (and his apostles) on deep metaphysical matters, but not couched in a precise philosophical terminology, it is almost inevitable that they will need to be understood in ways more precise than the established ones of ordinary language. On some matters, of course, the Church's definitions may simply consist in repeating some sentence of Scripture or defining some sentence deducible therefrom; but my point is that there is no reason to suppose that that will always be so.

I do not find the 'deduction' view in Aquinas. Although Aquinas held that the content of later doctrinal statements was contained 'implicitly' in what had gone before, his examples of things 'implicit' in other things are very far from suggesting that mere deduction (let alone deduction in the pattern of a syllogism) could draw out what was implicit. Aquinas thought of the Church as beginning with Abraham, not with Christ, and that 'all the articles of faith are contained implicitly in certain primary things to be believed, namely that God exists and has providence over man's salvation';³¹ and he cannot have thought that mere deduction would give us the Nicene Creed from those primary things. Indeed, he goes on³² to compare God's revelation in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament to that of a teacher who does not teach a discipline all at once to a pupil who could not absorb it, but teaches it little by little; and he makes no distinction between the New Testament drawing out what was implicit in the Old and the creeds drawing out what is implicit in Scripture as a whole. So Aquinas clearly holds that what is 'implicit' is made explicit by a process much more subtle and less rigorous than deduction. Hence his view seems to me to be very similar to that expounded by Newman in the nineteenth century. For Newman the derivation of a new formula was the perception of its 'congruity' with Scripture and with the 'intuitive sense' of the Church. Looking back, the Church perceived a rational 'development', a 'logical sequence'. But the 'logical sequence' of Newman is not the 'logical implication' of the scholastics, though the latter might be a part or aspect of the former. It means rather a harmony or congruity or 'naturalness' in the way which ideas have developed.³³ Because Newman was not a rigorous thinker, he did not expound his account of derivation in a rigorous way, but I

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 1. 7.

³² *Ibid.* 2a. 2ae. 1. 7 ad 2.

³³ J. H. Newman, *The Idea of the Development of Christian Doctrine*; expounded in Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, ch. 7. See p. 157.

believe that it is not too dissimilar from the account which I have just given. While serious consideration of the nature of derivation from the original derivation began in sixteenth century Spain, it was Newman's *Essay* which made this issue an important one in Catholic theology, and many Catholic writers of the twentieth century gave accounts of derivation very much in the spirit of Newman.³⁴

The process which I have described for interpreting the original revelation clearly gives great scope for spiritual reflection (facing up to things honestly and pursuing them thoroughly) and intellectual systematization. To give us enough data to make all this possible, I claimed in Chapter 5, was part of the point of revelation. It is made possible by the existence in the New Testament of very different traditions of thought in terms of which the core message of the Gospel is expressed—the Palestinian Jewish (e.g. of the opening chapters of St Matthew's Gospel), Pauline, and Johannine traditions. The hard work of Christian derivation involves getting these into one focus. This process of constructing an overall theory which gives the simplest account of the data will be most in evidence with respect to matters about which there is no explicit teaching in the original revelation. I claimed in chapter 7 that Jesus taught (especially by actions, which could be recognized later as having this significance) that he was divine—that is, God—and that he gave some teaching implying that there was a Holy Spirit who was also divine. I gave reasons why it would have been very difficult for first-century Jews to grasp much of what was involved in all this, at least until after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. And, as I wrote above, these deep metaphysical suggestions clearly need careful philosophical exposition in terms of categories unavailable to first-century Jews. So there is every reason to expect the interpretation of revelation to involve high-level systematization when dealing with what Jesus was getting at here.

³⁴ For the period before Newman, see Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*. For subsequent Catholic thought up to the Second Vatican Council, see Nichols, *From Newman to Congar*. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged that there is a growth in understanding of the original revelation: 'There is growth in understanding of what is handed on, both the words and the realities they signify. This comes about through contemplation and study by believers who ponder these things in their hearts (see Luke 2: 19 and 51); through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience; and through the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, receive the sure charism of truth' (Tanner, 974). But, while emphasizing that the bishops of the Church can distinguish between a true and a false understanding of these realities, it provided no criterion for how they should do this.

And in fact this very process was at work in the development of the two central doctrines of Christianity which received formal definition by Councils in the fourth and fifth centuries and which were subsequently recognized as essential doctrines by Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants alike—the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. We saw also that there are a few passages in the New Testament which, understood with their literal meanings, state, and many more which presuppose or entail, that Jesus Christ is God. For example, the opening passage of St John's Gospel, speaking of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, claims that 'The Word was God' and 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. St John distinguishes elsewhere in the Gospel between Jesus Christ and God the Father who sent him. There are other passages in the New Testament which, when read literally, distinguish the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son and seem to presuppose that he is on the divine side of the divine/creature divide. Liturgical practice in the early Church contained some expressions mentioning 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' as similar beings. The early Church believed that the practice and doctrine which it inherited were divinely revealed; it saw the books which it therefore came to recognize (by the criteria outlined earlier) as canonical Scripture as incorporating that revelation; and it saw the New Testament, and especially the Gospels, as the core of that revelation, by which other scriptural books were to be interpreted. It felt itself aware of God in its worship and prayer, and there was scriptural authority that that of which it was then aware was the Holy Spirit. Some theologians came to teach that a unique divine person who was Love would need another divine person or persons to whom to express that love. On the other hand, all Christians believed partly on the basis of the Old Testament and partly because of the arguments of natural theology, stated by Greek philosophers, defended by St Paul, and repeated by some of the Fathers, that there was only one God: arguments from the world to God led to one and only one God in charge of the world.³⁵ This was something knowable by natural reason.

So in the course of the third and fourth centuries AD the Church tried to devise a formula to systematize these Trinitarian intuitions. There were various formulae, around which doctrinal battles raged. The view of Arius that the Son was 'of like substance' with the Father

³⁵ For further details of early Christian defences of natural theology (arguments from the world to God), see my *Faith and Reason*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2005), 110–13.

nearly won the day; but it was eventually defeated because it suggested that the Son was less divine than the Father. It would have been a consequence of this latter understanding that it was not one who was fully God whose life and death on the Cross was the means of human redemption—as so much of the New Testament and later tradition vigorously affirmed. The preferred formula adopted by the Council of Nicea in AD 325 was that the Son was ‘of the same substance’ with the Father. The three entities (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) came to be called three hypostases, or persons; and all to be ‘of the same substance’—distinct yet equally divine.³⁶ Such was the teaching of the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. But what ‘of the same substance’ meant was unclear. Did it mean that all three persons belonged to the same genus, the divine, in no stronger a sense than that three humans all belong to the genus of human beings? Or did it mean that all three were the same individual thing? Clearly in some sense they had to be the same individual thing—for there was only one God. So there was an issue of how that was compatible with there being three divine persons; for it looks as if a divine person must be (in a wide sense) a thing, a substance; and God is (in a wide sense) a substance—so it looks as if the formula involves the contradiction that there are three divine substances and only one divine substance. It left the apparent contradiction to be sorted out by later Councils and theologians.³⁷

The ‘derivation’ from Scripture can hardly be deduction from scriptural sentences given normal meanings. We saw in Chapter 7 that there are scriptural passages which taken with their normal meanings most naturally imply doctrines contrary to later orthodoxy—for one more example consider Jesus’s statement in St John’s Gospel that ‘the Father is greater than I’.³⁸ For all of such passages, one party in the Church proposed, and eventually the Church proclaimed as official doctrine, one interpretation which it claimed is the most plausible interpretation of the message of Scripture and Church tradition as a whole. This forced the church to claim that certain past ways of worship were

³⁶ For the sense in which the ‘persons’ of the Trinity are persons, see the discussion on p. 232.

³⁷ I have argued in *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), esp. ch. 8, that there are a good a priori arguments in favour of the doctrine of the Trinity (i.e. arguments to show that if there is at least one divine person, as shown by natural theology, then there are three and only three divine persons). I try to expound there the sense in which there is one God, yet three divine persons. My argument systematizes and develops the arguments of Richard of St Victor.

³⁸ John 14: 28.

misleading, and certain statements of past theologians false, and that certain passages of Scripture have to be interpreted with other than their normal meanings or even any literal meaning. In such a case the Church must claim that any rival theory forces us to regard more worship and past theology and also perhaps some deliverances of natural reason as mistaken and forces more passages of Scripture to be taken with other than their normal or any literal meanings.

This process led theologians guided by the fourth-century Councils to interpret Christ being 'the first-born of all creation' in the sense that Christ was 'begotten of the Father before all worlds'. He was not 'created' out of nothing, let alone out of pre-existing non-divine matter, but out of the stuff of the Father—which is why theology came to prefer the word 'begotten', chosen to make clear that neither of the two former views were implied; Christ was 'begotten' of the Father himself 'eternally'. Again, 'the Father is greater than I' was to be understood in some way other than the literal way—for instance, that Christ, in so far as he was human, was less than the Father.

A similar process was at work in 'deriving' the other great patristic doctrine: that Jesus Christ who walked on Earth was fully God and at the same time fully human. Again, there are the New Testament passages already cited which, taken with their literal meanings, imply his divinity. But there are also plenty of New Testament passages which, taken with their literal meanings, imply his humanity. St Paul's Letter to the Romans speaks of Christ as 'born of the seed of David according to the flesh'.³⁹ The First Letter of John speaks of Christ as having 'come in the flesh'.⁴⁰ The Letter to the Hebrews stresses that Christ 'in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin'.⁴¹

All of these passages could, however, be read in a 'docetist' way: that is, as implying that Jesus Christ was God and not human; temporarily clothed with flesh, and perhaps temporarily suffering, but not truly human. But the early Church wanted to read them with the interpretation which it held to be best consonant with the rest of Scripture, for it believed that the humanity of Jesus was important if he was to be the means of our salvation. Only if God shared our humanity fully, they thought, could he truly redeem it—by living a perfect human life. So it developed the doctrine which finally received its canonical expression in the declaration of the Council of Chalcedon that 'one Lord Jesus Christ', 'truly God and truly man', was 'consubstantial with the

³⁹ Rom. 1: 3.

⁴⁰ 1 John 4: 2.

⁴¹ Heb. 4: 15.

Father as regarding his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity'.⁴² He was one *ὑπόστασις*, naturally understood as 'individual', who has two *φύσεις*, naturally understood as 'natures', human and divine. But then, natural reason protests, it does rather look as if to be human involves not being omnipotent, omniscient, etc.; and being divine does involve being omnipotent, omniscient, etc. The formula, however, in this case systematized the tradition, written and unwritten, without sorting out the conflict with natural reason⁴³—just as a physicist may put forward as the best explanation of his data that light is both a particle and a wave without telling us how it could be both.

So in the case of both these doctrines, although Councils systematized tradition and took into account natural reason where that would not do too much violence to the tradition (e.g. in reaffirming its claim that there was only one God), natural reason could not overrule the weight of tradition. If there remained an apparent contradiction within central elements of the tradition, it had to be left. It could not of course be a real contradiction—for no self-contradictory claim can be true. But it was left to other Councils and theologians to explain how the apparent contradiction was not a real contradiction; and I have something to say about one way of doing this in Chapter 9.

Although the ways eventually adopted by Church Councils of systematizing the data of the original deposit to produce their doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were, I believe, the most plausible ones (i.e. the ones which best satisfied the criteria for doing this, and so the ones most probably true), there were other rival ways of systematizing the data advocated by theologians which had some degree of plausibility. There was, as I mentioned, Arius's theory that the Son (Christ) was of 'similar substance' to the Father, almost divine but not fully divine, whereas the Father was fully divine. Weighing rival interpretations of the data for relative plausibility is a delicate matter. While some interpretations are obviously implausible, others are not—hence the need for God-inspired Councils (or Popes) to determine which among plausible interpretations is the most plausible.⁴⁴ But if there were no

⁴² Tanner, 86.

⁴³ For my own attempt at making sense of the apparent conflict, see *The Christian God*, chs. 9 and 10.

⁴⁴ Even Luther seems to have taught that the Church sets the limits to possible interpretations of Scripture. Scripture could not be interpreted out of line with a unanimous past tradition of interpretation. See McGrath, *Intellectual Origins of the*

public procedures for assessing rival interpretations, there would be no way in which theologians or Councils (or Popes) could set about the task of interpreting the original revelation; and there would be no doctrine criterion by which we could assess whether some ecclesial body was the Church or part thereof; and, as this chapter illustrates, the organization criterion is manifestly insufficient for this purpose.

Some modern writers have nevertheless given accounts of the 'derivation' of doctrine which might seem to allow that any process at all of formalizing the presuppositions of any patterns of devotion which have developed over a period in the Church which led to a subsequent definition, or indeed any view accepted later in 'the church' could count as proper 'derivation'. Of course, various events in the history of thought and practice within and outside the Church, including the development of practices of devotion, can cause Christians to believe that certain doctrines are involved in the original revelation.⁴⁵ But what is at stake is, whatever the cause of such a belief, whether there are public rational procedures of argument (whether deductive or of a looser kind) to show that what some believed to be involved in the original revelation really was so involved, procedures which allow us to reject implausible interpretations of that revelation. I have claimed that we cannot do without these, and that Christian tradition involves accepting or rejecting doctrines on the basis of such procedures.

European Reformation, 149. For the different ways in which Protestants of the past century 'derived' doctrines from Scriptures, see D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (SCM Press, 1975), 45.

⁴⁵ One recent account of the development of Christian thinking outside the formal decisions of Councils or Popes but ultimately influencing them, impressive for the wealth of its erudition about the history of Christian art and secular culture, is David Brown's two volume *Tradition and Imagination* and *Discipleship and Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Brown describes how both patterns of devotion in the Church and also many external influences have led to new views on doctrinal and moral issues. At the end of the second volume Brown sets out ten kinds of criteria which have been at work in distinguishing legitimate Christian doctrinal (and other) developments from illegitimate ones. Seven of these are external criteria, in the sense of ones that use techniques and intuitions which in no way assume that God intervened in the world in Christ, criteria, i.e., of natural reason. Doctrinal and other developments should be judged by their conformity to currently accepted (on the basis of purely secular standards) results of historical and scientific inquiry, and by their conceptual coherence and sensitivity to moral, artistic, and imaginative insights. Yet, continuity with ecclesial tradition and interpretation in the light of fidelity to Christ are also important, Brown claims. Yet, although Brown often expresses a view about which developments are good, he gives no general rule for how the Church ought to weigh the satisfaction of these latter criteria (stated very vaguely) against the non-satisfaction of other criteria.

ADDITIONS TO THE DEPOSIT

Once the church had begun to derive doctrines from the deposit, the issue arose as to whether those derived doctrines themselves had authority and so could be used for the derivation of yet further doctrines. For a pure Protestant, the answer must be No—Scripture is the sole source of doctrine, and there is no place for intermediate interpretations themselves generating further doctrines.

The Church of the pre-Reformation centuries, however, gave a particular primacy of interpretation to the Fathers—that is, those theologians of (roughly) the first millennium, recognized as orthodox and authoritative. Their writings were given a semi-authoritative status; and some of them (e.g. Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Gregory Nazianzen, known as ‘Gregory the theologian’, in the East; and Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great in the West) carried a lot more weight than others. In any theological argument, wrote the seventh-century Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor, it was necessary to produce ‘the voices of the fathers as evidence for the faith of the Church’; the faith is ‘what the fathers have taught us’.⁴⁶ The Council of Trent also declared that no one should interpret Scripture ‘contrary to the unanimous consensus of the Fathers’.⁴⁷ The Fathers provided a tradition of ‘weighting’, of which parts of Scripture had to be interpreted in the light of other parts.

But far greater authority was always regarded by all church bodies of any size and at all periods before the Reformation as belonging to official definitions of church councils and, by Roman Catholics, of Popes. The distinction between all-important teaching and other teaching began to take the form of a distinction between ‘infallible’ definitions and the ‘ordinary teaching’ of the Church.⁴⁸ The ordinary teaching has authority at least in the respect that the very fact of its promulgation provides adequate grounds for believing it to be true, in the absence of counter-evidence; but that teaching could be overruled by

⁴⁶ Maximus the Confessor, Epistle 12, PG 91. 465.

⁴⁷ Tanner, 664.

⁴⁸ This distinction had clearly not been firmed up by the time of Augustine. He claimed that, while Scripture should always be believed, we need the Church to explain what it means. In respect of their interpretations, Councils are to be preferred to post-apostolic bishops, General Councils to local ones, and ‘among General Councils, earlier ones are often improved (*emendari*) by later ones’ (*Treatise on Baptism*, 2. 3–4). This suggests that no interpretations are irreformable.

a higher church authority (if there was one) or changed by a later church decision. That doctrines could in this way be added to the deposit of faith, either permanently or in the absence of strong contrary reason for removing them, was so generally agreed as a procedure involved in the continuity of doctrine from the apostolic church, that the call of Protestants at the Reformation to start again from Scripture can only be regarded as an enormous innovation. It can only be justified if it can be shown by historical evidence that by the time of the Reformation the Church's doctrine had diverged so far from the original revelation that the Protestant innovation was necessary to restore connectedness of doctrine with the original revelation, despite the fact that continuity of doctrine within the Church shown to be such by the organization criterion was evidence of the truth of the resulting doctrine. To show that, we would need to have a lot of very detailed and reliable evidence about the content of the original revelation. The Protestant innovation had the consequence that one set of doctrines taught as all-important for centuries in both Orthodox and Catholic churches (e.g. doctrines of the sacraments, the propriety of venerating icons, etc.) were false; so Protestants would need to claim that this set was the isolated exception (see p. 181), whose falsity is compatible with their having been a revelation. (The problem of the long period during which these doctrines were taught in the Church as all-important worried Luther; see n. 5.) Or Protestants could perhaps claim that Monophysite and 'Nestorian' churches were not committed to the all-importance of these doctrines, and so they kept the Church in existence during these centuries.

But while all pre-Reformation theologians agreed that the Church could give substantial and sometimes infallible authority to doctrines, there were vast disputes about which church organs (Councils, and if so, which Councils, or the Pope) had the power to do this. And disputes about continuity of organization turned a lot on who had this power, and so on the status of various doctrinal definitions. So I turn to the issue of connectedness and continuity of organization.

CONNECTEDNESS AND CONTINUITY OF ORGANIZATION

Connectedness of organization is being (shown by historical evidence to be) organized in the way in which the apostolic church was organized. Historical evidence can show something about this, but there is much

about which we can only speculate. What follows in the next two paragraphs is my view of what we can glean from the New Testament about the organization of the apostolic church.

Since apostolic times, the church has been regarded as the community of the baptized, even if by their doctrines and way of life some of the baptized have (perhaps only temporarily) separated themselves from participating in that community; and church membership has been regarded as involving participation in the eucharist (and so reception of the sacrament of Christ's 'body' and 'blood'). It seems fairly clear that 'the twelve' (minus Judas and, Acts tells us, with the addition of Matthias) formed the initial governing body of the apostolic church, and that Peter was their initial leader. Acts tells of 'the twelve', whom it seems to equate with 'the apostles', laying their hands on seven men to perform an administrative task, men whom the later church came to regard as the first 'deacons'.⁴⁹ Acts tells also of 'the apostles' sending Peter and John to 'lay their hands' on new converts in Samaria, so that they might 'receive the Holy Spirit'.⁵⁰ It seems that the governing body soon came to include more members. Acts 15 records that a crucial decision for the future of the Church was made by 'the apostles and elders', very prominent among whom was James, 'the brother of the Lord', who was not—apparently—one of the twelve.⁵¹ And it was 'James and Cephas [i.e. Peter] and John, who were acknowledged pillars [of the Church]' who, according to Paul, recognized the ministry of Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles, paralleling their own ministry to the Jews.⁵² And Acts tells of Paul and Barnabas commissioning others to head local churches;⁵³ and New Testament letters tell congregations to be obedient to them.⁵⁴

The first formal resolution of dispute about doctrine was that recorded in Acts 15, where the 'apostles and elders' at Jerusalem 'met together' to consider a query from the church at Antioch about whether it was necessary for converts to be circumcised and 'keep the law of Moses'.⁵⁵ They reached a decision that this was not necessary, and sent a letter to Antioch announcing their decision beginning with the words 'It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us';⁵⁶ and the decrees of this Council were conveyed by Paul and Timothy to many other cities as decrees to be observed.⁵⁷ This 'Council of Jerusalem' was surely the first Ecumenical Council of the Church, since it claimed to be making

⁴⁹ Acts 6: 1–6.

⁵² Gal. 2: 1–10.

⁵⁵ Acts 15: 5–6.

⁵⁰ Acts 8: 14–17.

⁵³ Acts 14: 23.

⁵⁶ Acts 15: 28.

⁵¹ Acts 15: 1–35.

⁵⁴ e.g. I Thess. 5: 12; I Pet. 5: 1–3.

⁵⁷ Acts 16: 4.

a decision for and on behalf of the whole Church and not merely for and on behalf of a part of it. (The title of 'First Ecumenical Council' traditionally belongs to the Council of Nicaea, however.)

What historical evidence cannot show us is who in these early years was allowed to celebrate the eucharist, and what exactly were the rules for who decided, what who (besides Paul and Barnabas) were authorized to establish new churches, and what in detail was the method of their commissioning. And the evidence leaves it very unclear what was the relative authority in the church of Peter and James. We just don't have a full plan of first-century church organization.

An ecclesial body having continuity of organization with a previous body consists in its organizational procedures being explicitly authorized by the previous church, or resulting from gradual changes implicitly recognized by the previous church. All the available evidence (although very scant until the later part of the second century) suggests that the church of the period up to AD 325 was in different respects both hierarchical and collegiate. It was hierarchical in the respect that church leaders (sometimes perhaps elected by their local churches, sometimes appointed from above) had to be commissioned or recognized in some way or other by those who were already leaders, and so back to the apostles. This general requirement crystallized out within a century into a system whereby there were three grades of church officers—bishops, priests, and deacons—and each diocese was headed by a bishop. Bishops were commissioned—that is, ordained—by other bishops; and priests and deacons were ordained by a bishop. Bishops and priests authorized by their bishop to do so were alone permitted to celebrate the eucharist. A bishop had authority for organization and teaching within his diocese. The church was collegiate in that all determinations of the content of Christian doctrine and big issues of church organization required a decision by a council of leaders (i.e. from the second century onwards, bishops) and (in cases of dispute) acceptance by a much wider spectrum of Christians. Disputes about doctrine and organization were settled by local councils of bishops from the same part of the world who somehow managed to align their views with the views of other local councils. Although inevitably (in view of the persecutions of Christians and the great distances between parts of the Church) church organization seems at times to have been chaotic, by the time of the Council of Nicaea, the first 'Ecumenical Council' of the Church, a definite system seems to have evolved; and there were no parts of the Church differing from each other markedly in organization and making rival claims for greater

continuity of organization. The Council of Nicaea stated that bishops should be elected (at a meeting or by 'postal vote') by all the bishops of the province (i.e. the dioceses in the same region), and the vote should be confirmed by the metropolitan bishop (i.e. the chief bishop of the province).⁵⁸ Normal historical evidence cannot show us how these arrangements evolved—whether as a result of explicit decisions by the apostolic church, or as a result of implicit acceptance by all the church of gradual changes occurring in some parts of the church. But the arrangements came to be accepted very widely among those who had any degree of continuity of organization and any significant degree of connectedness and continuity of doctrine with the apostolic church.

In the next first centuries there were many councils of bishops representing most regions of the church, some of which were subsequently deemed 'Ecumenical', and the decisions of the latter were regarded as binding on the whole church and later deemed 'infallible'. Roman Catholics and Orthodox recognize seven such Councils (in addition to 'The Council of Jerusalem') during the first millennium; and Catholics recognize many later Councils up to and including the Second Vatican Council. Among the Oriental Orthodox, the so-called monophysite churches recognize only the first three Councils, while the 'Nestorian' 'Church of the East' recognizes only the first two. Although Ecumenical Councils had this paramount authority, both local councils of bishops and individual bishops (unless overruled by local councils) were recognized as having authority to issue ordinary teaching. But that was not considered infallible, and could always be overruled by an Ecumenical Council.

What determined the status of a Council as Ecumenical? Neither the number of bishops attending, nor their representative character, since other councils subsequently deemed heretical (the Council of Arminium-Selucia of 359, the Council of Ephesus of 449, and the Council of Hieria of 754) included considerable numbers of bishops from several parts of the church. Nor did a Council need to be summoned by the Pope. The early Councils were summoned by a Roman Emperor, sometimes without seeking the Pope's agreement; and the Pope was not even invited to attend the Second Ecumenical Council (the First Council of Constantinople). It was what happened afterwards which determined the status of a Council as Ecumenical. One Orthodox view is that it was widespread approval by the Church at large, including approval

⁵⁸ Tanner, 7.

by a subsequent widely representative Council, which determined this status.⁵⁹ The general councils subsequently regarded as heretical were so regarded because of widespread rejection of their teaching. The Catholic view is that the Pope's approval was what gave a Council the status of 'Ecumenical'. That approval was certainly given to the first seven Councils, though in the case of the First Council of Constantinople, the earliest it can be thought to have been given was sixty years later, by a Pope approving the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon which included its approval of the earlier Council. But that fact is not enough to show that papal approval was regarded as essential. The Pope was recognized very early in church history as the senior bishop of the church; and he based his authority on being the successor of St Peter as Bishop of Rome. But it is the subject of great historical dispute whether during the first 800 years of the Church's life (even in the West) he was generally recognized as having any more authority than that of the senior bishop, whose guidance was much to be respected.

So continuity of organization requires continuity in respect of procedures for electing and ordaining bishops and priests, the procedures for which did not give rise to much dispute in the centuries between the fifth and the fifteenth, and the procedures for resolving doctrinal disputes, which were never altogether clear.

LATER CHURCH DIVISIONS

Before I come to consider, in the light of these understandings of connectedness and continuity of doctrine and organization, which later ecclesial body or bodies can claim to satisfy our two pairs of criteria best, I must summarize very briefly the story of later church divisions.

The three central metaphysical doctrines of Christianity—the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement—are so well grounded in almost unanimous Christian tradition (Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Protestant) that a body which denied those doctrines would have made an enormous breach of continuity of doctrine. Virtually all ecclesial bodies existing between the ninth and nineteenth centuries with any case for continuity of organization were committed to the Nicene Creed, formulated by the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, which

⁵⁹ For more historical detail on this, see Kallistos Ware, 'The Ecumenical Councils and the Conscience of the Church', in *Kanon*, ii (Verlag Herder, 1974).

contained these doctrines. (By the ninth century, Arian opposition to the Creed had virtually died out, while after the nineteenth century some ecclesial bodies began to adopt very liberal interpretations of credal doctrines very different from earlier interpretations.) This creed also contained other equally central (historical and other) doctrines which were never the subject of serious subsequent Christian dispute, above all the doctrine of Christ's Resurrection. It is true that, as I mentioned earlier, two Christian bodies (one of them—the 'monophysites'—of substantial size) rejected the amplification of the Nicene Creed by the definition of the Council of Chalcedon concerning the nature of Christ. Chalcedon declared that Christ was one *ὑπόστασις*, (individual) in two *φύσεις* (natures), while the monophysites declared that there was only one *φύσις*. But discussions in the last twenty years between the official representatives of monophysite churches and official representatives of the Orthodox Church have established that—at any rate, today—there is no substantial disagreement on the part of monophysite churches with the understanding of the definition of Chalcedon developed by both Catholics and Orthodox; the Greek words are understood differently by these two groups.⁶⁰ And similarly discussions between the 'Church of the East' which claims that there are two *ὑποστάσεις* and the Catholic church have established that there is today no disagreement on that understanding; again, an ambiguity in the Greeks words is blamed.⁶¹

This general agreement of the Christian tradition (at least until the last hundred years) which exists in respect of the doctrines of the Nicene Creed covers two other doctrinal matters which were not the subject of great controversy, at least after the third century. One discussed earlier in the chapter, and to receive further discussion in Chapter 10, is the authority of Scripture. And the second matter, to be discussed in Chapter 11, is a common view on many matters of personal morality (abortion, homosexuality, etc.).

However, the second millennium of Christianity saw the emergence of significant differences on other central matters between mainstream ecclesial bodies. There were doctrinal issues at stake in the schism

⁶⁰ See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. edn. (Penguin, 1993), 311–13. For the official statements of both bodies, see C. Chaillot and A. Belopolsky, (eds.), *Towards Unity* (Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, 1998).

⁶¹ The 'Common Christological Declaration' of 1994, signed jointly by the Pope and the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East affirmed that 'The divinity and humanity are united in the person of the same and unique Son of God and Lord Jesus Christ' (cited from the website of the Church of the East <www.cired.org>).

between Roman Catholics and Orthodox (conventionally dated 1054). But I think that both sides would agree that the most important issue was the extent of the Pope's authority, which in my terminology is an issue of organization, although it later gave rise to an issue of doctrine. Beginning from early Christian centuries, there was a gradual growth in the authority of the Pope in the Western church in laying down principles of church organization, and confirming the decisions of Councils on doctrines. But the Eastern church resisted this growth, hence the 1054 schism. A crucial exercise of the Pope's growing claim to authority was his approval on his own authority of the addition to the claim of the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father' of the words 'and the Son' (*filioque*). This addition, approved later in an official definition of the Fourth Lateran Council (AD 1215), was subsequently taken for granted by most Protestant bodies. It was never recognized by the Orthodox Church. After the schism, the Pope's authority continued to grow in the West; and soon in what was now the Roman Catholic church the election of bishops came to require the Pope's approval (a requirement quite unknown in the Eastern Church). And only within the last century, that election has become simply an appointment by the Pope. By contrast, the Orthodox church (despite a long period in which, as in the West, secular rulers had a predominant influence on the election of bishops) does on the whole now conform to the arrangements for the election of bishops laid down by the Council of Nicaea. Both bodies, however, have always required bishops to be ordained by other bishops.

By far the most significant step in this process was the proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility in AD 1870. This stated that only the Pope confirming the decisions of a Council, or acting by himself declaring *ex cathedra* a doctrine *de fide* or *de moribus*, has infallible authority.⁶² The distinction between the infallible (*ex cathedra*) declarations of a Pope and his ordinary teaching was in no way clear before recent centuries; so it is unclear which, if any, of the earlier declarations by a Pope (apart from those confirming decisions of a Council) are *ex cathedra*. But it is doubtful whether the mere satisfaction of an organization test (a Pope apparently declaring some doctrine *ex cathedra*) can—even according to Roman Catholic theology—settle the issue of whether a doctrine is true. The Second Vatican Council voted against an amendment which Pope Paul VI wished to add to the Council's decree *Lumen gentium*, saying

⁶² Tanner, 816.

that the Pope owed account to God alone. The Theological Commission of the Council added a note of explanation of the rejection: 'The Roman Pontiff is bound to abide by Revelation itself, the basic structure of the church, the sacraments, the definitions of the first councils etc. It is impossible to list them all.' In effect, there are tests *ab extra* of what constitutes a true papal definition.⁶³ So, the Theological Commission was claiming, the mere fact that it fails to follow tradition invalidates a purported papal definition. But it would require time for the Church to come to some sort of consensus that some purported definition fails to follow tradition.

The Orthodox church, by contrast, has held that only the doctrinal definitions of the seven Ecumenical Councils are infallible, and so irreformable. And perhaps the majority of Orthodox theologians hold that the status of a Council as Ecumenical depends on its widespread subsequent acceptance (which seems to mean something like acceptance by most parts of the Church within the following few decades). And I have suggested that in effect the Catholic Church requires something like widespread tacit acceptance that a new definition does not contradict doctrines previously accepted as all-important. Protestantism has in general denied that Ecumenical Councils have any authority as to how Scripture and church tradition should be interpreted. As mentioned earlier, most Protestant churches broke the 'apostolic succession' at the Reformation, so that their leaders were no longer ordained by bishops whose own ordination derived by a chain going back ultimately to the church of the first centuries; so celebration of the eucharist was no longer confined to priests who were ordained by bishops who had this succession. The Church of England, and so the Anglican Communion which resulted from its expansion into other countries, has, however, always claimed to have maintained that succession,⁶⁴ and

⁶³ On this, see J. M. R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, trans. J. De Satge (SPCK, 1983), 41. See too Rahner, that most influential of modern Roman Catholic theologians: 'Any fresh dogmas which might possibly be conceived of would still in any case continue to relate to the former ones as remaining in force. A pope who altogether failed to recognise this fact in his new definition, and ran counter in it to earlier definitions, would show himself to be a heretic who had lost his doctrinal authority' (K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, xiv, trans. D. Bourke (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 81).

⁶⁴ A papal encyclical of 1896, *On Anglican Orders*, in H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Herder, 1963), 3315–19, claimed that at the Reformation the Church of England had broken the apostolic succession, because it no longer had a proper view of the nature of the priesthood to which Anglican priests were being ordained, and so no longer had a proper view of the nature of the episcopate which

clearly considers it important. And, while not officially committed to the doctrinal authority of Ecumenical Councils or any other church bodies, in practice it gives considerable respect to the decisions of the first four Ecumenical Councils.

At the Reformation doctrinal differences were of at least equal importance to differences regarding organization. Protestant churches adopted doctrines of the sacraments different from those held fairly universally for much of the previous millennium. The traditional view was that there were seven sacraments, and that reception of the sacraments made a real difference to the recipient. For Protestants there were only two sacraments (baptism and eucharist); and for many Protestants they had merely symbolic significance. Most Protestants rejected prayer for the dead, the invocation of the saints (prayer to the dead saints asking for their prayers), and the veneration of images (e.g. icons). In these respects they taught that practices observed almost universally throughout Christendom for the previous millennium (since the Second Council of Nicaea of AD 787) were immoral. Protestant churches also adopted doctrines of human nature (doctrines concerned with original sin, free will, and 'justification'—i.e. what had to happen for some human to be 'saved') different from those of later medieval Catholicism which received official Catholic approval at the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent. Protestants magnified the extent of original sin, in the sense of human inability to do any good as a result of the Fall, and often claimed that humans have no significant free will, and are justified and so saved 'by the sole act of God' responding to them (caused by God) to put their faith in Christ. These latter doctrines do, however, have more ancient Western Catholic roots in the teaching of Augustine. The alternative view of human nature was that the Fall did not deprive humans of all capacity for doing good, that they always had significant free will, including in respect of whether or not to accept the grace of God which would eventually lead to their salvation. This latter view of human nature has always been held by the Orthodox church. Its renewed popularity in the West was due to the writings of Duns Scotus at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In my opinion, it was the view of most Christians before Augustine.

included the priesthood. In practice, Orthodox churches have also refused to acknowledge Anglican ordinations as valid, since they have always required Anglican priests who converted to Orthodoxy to be reordained before they could exercise a priestly ministry.

These differences regarding human nature affected the way in which the doctrine of the Atonement (that Christ atoned for our sins) was developed by theologians of different persuasions.⁶⁵

The definition of papal infallibility made a very sharp difference in doctrine between the Roman Catholic church and all other ecclesial bodies. And by giving infallible status to two further doctrines proclaimed by Popes on their own authority, it produced two further differences. These doctrines were the two Marian doctrines of the Immaculate Conception (that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was conceived free from the guilt, *culpa*, of original sin) and the Bodily Assumption (that God took the body of Mary to Heaven immediately after her death).

The past century has seen the adoption by many Protestant theologians of very liberal interpretations of many traditional doctrines. Some of these interpretations might be considered to have a good ancestry in the teaching of the early Fathers, or to concern issues not too central to Christian tradition. But in respect of what many would regard as the central doctrine of Christianity, the Incarnation, many Protestants have adopted an 'interpretation' so radical as totally to transform that doctrine. They claim that in Christ an ordinary human became so open to divinity that he became divine.⁶⁶ That is evidently totally contrary to the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation, that God became a human. Liberal Protestant churches have permitted this interpretation to be taught in churches.

TODAY'S CHURCHES

So, given the need for a church to interpret revelation, where is such a church to be found today? We must apply my two pairs of criteria—connectedness and continuity of doctrine and organization to determine which one or more ecclesial bodies is the best candidate for being such a church. And there is no escape from detailed historical work to determine the answer. Many books have been written on the detailed historical issues; and if I were to attempt to probe these issues in any depth, I would have to write another, different book. All that I

⁶⁵ For further details of different Christian views about these doctrines of human nature and their history, see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), chs. 9 and 10.

⁶⁶ See e.g. John MacQuarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (SCM Press, 1990).

am attempting to do in this chapter is to show the kind of historical results which are relevant to the establishment of doctrinal truth, and to provide a framework into which we can fit our historical results. Protestants acknowledge that their doctrines of the sacraments, and of the immortality of prayer for the dead, the invocation of the saints, and the veneration of images, constitute a breach of continuity of doctrine with the church of the preceding millennium. They must therefore claim that their doctrines are those of the apostolic church, and so exhibit greater connectedness sufficient to outweigh the evident lack of continuity. What is at stake in the other doctrinal issues cannot be brought out so sharply. I would judge that each of the rival accounts of human nature can find some justification in the teaching of the apostolic church. So too perhaps can both the doctrine of papal infallibility and its denial. Rival scriptural quotations on all these issues are easy to find.⁶⁷ The historical evidence about the extent to which there was continuity in respect of these various doctrines for the first three centuries is, however, scant, although much fuller for subsequent centuries. The derivability of the Marian doctrines defined by Popes in the last two centuries can consist only in derivability from unwritten traditions.⁶⁸ So Roman Catholics need to produce evidence that there were unwritten traditions in the apostolic church from which these doctrines can be derived; and for this they must depend on evidence that such traditions were widespread in the third century, since we have quite a lot of evidence about what Christians believed then. But of course if there was a strong independent case for early recognition of papal infallibility, the

⁶⁷ For example, the power recorded in St Matthew's Gospel as given to Peter, subsequently the first Bishop of Rome, to 'bind and loose' (Matt. 16: 18–19) was recorded by John as given to 'the disciples' (John 20: 22–3). Peter's role as 'the rock' on which the Church is built (also mentioned in Matt. 16) was paralleled in the Book of Revelation where the author sees the holy city Jerusalem—the Church, that is—as 'having twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the Twelve apostles of the Lamb' (Rev. 21: 14). And, as mentioned earlier, the Council of Jerusalem reached its conclusions in the summary provided by James (presumably 'the Lord's brother') and not by Peter.

⁶⁸ The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary states that Mary was protected at her conception from all the stain of original guilt, *culpa* (Denzinger, 2803). There is some biblical evidence for the holiness of Mary (e.g. in her acceptance of the angel's commission, Luke 1: 38), and much early church tradition to this effect. But the issue of her being protected from the guilt of original sin never arose until Augustine expounded his harsh version of the theory of original sin, which was in my view a novel doctrine (see my *Responsibility and Atonement*, 144). And neither the New Testament nor any other writing of the first three centuries shows any knowledge at all of the doctrine of the Bodily Assumption.

very fact of the Marian doctrines having been defined by a Pope would be strong evidence for them.

All ecclesial bodies, except for some Protestant bodies, have preserved connectedness and continuity of organization in the respect of recognizing baptism as the method of entry into the church, and recognize the eucharist as the central Christian act of worship. Clearly, both the Roman Catholic church and the Orthodox church, and (to a lesser extent, because of its denial of the authority of Councils) the Anglican church, have significant claims to continuity of organization also in all other respects. But, as we saw with the example of the chess club at the beginning of this chapter, the use of unconstitutional procedures to ensure that a society pursues its aims does not necessarily bring about the non-existence of that society; and Protestants must argue that that was what happened with their procedures for commissioning church leaders at the Reformation. But to justify this breach of continuity of organization, Protestants require a clear historical argument in support of their view of the apostolic church's commissioning procedures. Whether the Catholic or the Orthodox church has the best claim to continuity of organization depends crucially on the evidence about the extent to which the Pope's authority was recognized in the early centuries.

The result of all this historical investigation might be that one ecclesial body satisfied my twin criteria for being the same ecclesial body as the apostolic church significantly better than any other such body. In that case that body would be the Church founded by Jesus. And in that case the doctrines which it treats as all-important today, or has treated for centuries in the past as all-important, must in general form the core of an irreformable corpus of Christian doctrine. If, for example, the Roman Catholic church proved to be such an overall 'best candidate', then the doctrines which it has consistently treated as 'infallible' would form this corpus.

On the other hand, as I noted earlier, it might turn out that two or more ecclesial bodies satisfy my twin criteria roughly equally well. Then we would have to say that the Church is a divided society. It cannot function properly because it consists of two or more ecclesial bodies with two or more systems of organization. I have already described the large amount of common doctrine, and to a lesser extent common organization, shared between most ecclesial bodies (at least until the advent in the nineteenth century of very radical doctrines in some Protestant bodies). The Roman Catholic church, the Orthodox church, and (to a lesser extent), the Anglican church share a great deal of further

common organization in the threefold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons (though disagreeing about the eligibility of women for the threefold ministry). And at any rate the first two are committed to the Nicene Creed as interpreted by the Council of Chalcedon and further common doctrines. If, indeed, the situation is that two or more ecclesial bodies are equal best satisfiers my twin criteria, it would be the situation described at the beginning of the chapter where schism in a society has led to there being no unique successor society, but a divided society which cannot function properly. In that case the corpus of irreformable revealed doctrine can consist only of those doctrines treated as all-important by those two or more ecclesial bodies today, or so treated for centuries in the past by all ecclesial bodies which then formed part of the Church.

The doctrines treated as all-important now or in the past either by the one ecclesial body which alone forms the Church (if there is only one such body), or so treated by the two or more ecclesial bodies which form (or did form) the Church (if that is the situation) I shall call 'central Christian doctrines'. As we have seen, the Orthodox church is committed to the infallible authority of seven Ecumenical Councils; so, if historical investigation revealed that the Orthodox church and the Roman Catholic church, and only these bodies, satisfied our twin pairs of criteria almost equally well, and much better than other bodies, then only the doctrinal definitions of those Councils would count as central Christian doctrines, but the decrees of any other Councils or of Popes would not.

Which doctrines are to count as central Christian doctrines will therefore depend very much on which ecclesial bodies we judge to be part of the Church. The wider our Church, the fewer such doctrines there will be. And when we have determined who are the 'all' to which it refers, we can apply the famous canon of Vincent of Lerins that the Catholic faith is 'that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all',⁶⁹ to identify that faith. But wherever we draw the boundaries of the Church, quite a lot of doctrines will be included. This is because all present-day ecclesial bodies (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) and all ecclesial bodies which have existed since the ninth century, which have any significant continuity of doctrine and organization with the apostolic church have been committed (at least until recently), as I noted earlier, not merely to the doctrines of the Nicene Creed but

⁶⁹ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 1. 2.

also to the 'truth' in some sense of Scripture and its importance for the derivation of doctrine (Scripture to be interpreted in a way to be discussed in Chapter 10), and some parts of a traditional morality (the boundaries of which will be explored in Chapter 11). (And I noted earlier that there is an understanding of the doctrines of the Incarnation contained in the Nicene Creed common to all the bodies which did and did not accept the definition of the Council of Chalcedon.) And that commitment has involved treating these doctrines as all-important in my sense. Now maybe some Protestant (including Anglican) bodies are no longer committed to these doctrines, or at any rate to treating them as all-important. But, given my earlier claim that the Church cannot in general abandon doctrines treated for centuries as all-important, these doctrines remain central Christian doctrines. So either the abandonment of these doctrines by these bodies must be regarded as a temporary blip (consistency being measured over a long period), or—I suggest—their bodies have proved to have so much less continuity of doctrine than other bodies, as not to constitute parts of the church. I should add that it would still probably be the case that all the baptized (who had not denied their faith) would remain members of the Church, because almost all ecclesial bodies which are plausible candidates for being that Church teach that the baptized are members of the Church.

There are of course many doctrines which the Church (wherever its boundaries are drawn) teaches now or has taught which do not (yet) have the status of central Christian doctrines, even though perhaps they are widely agreed and properly derivable from the deposit of faith. It would be mistaken to count these doctrines as having a greater status than that of the 'ordinary' teaching of the Church. For the very fact that they could be questioned and that not every ecclesial body which was part of the Church would have excluded from church membership those who held a contrary view entailed that they were still open for discussion. And if one of the purposes of a revelation, as I have suggested, is to give church members enough information to sort out issues for themselves, there will always be issues of this kind.

If the Church is divided in the way which I have delineated, this would be a highly unsatisfactory situation, because we need continuing interpretation of revelation, and so a church with a mechanism for providing it; and Christians must work to reunite the broken body of Christ. The Church not functioning properly today is still compatible with its functioning correctly being to function in the way which best preserves continuity or organization back to the apostolic church,

whatever that way is; and that is the organization which Christians must seek to restore. Meanwhile, clearly we would still have a lot of interpretations provided in earlier centuries which give quite a lot of guidance. Ecclesial bodies must accept or reject other doctrines on the basis of their proper derivability from the deposit of faith, and commend them or their negations to their members accordingly. The Church was (for different reasons) in somewhat the same situation of not having one central procedure for defining doctrine for the three centuries between the Council of Jerusalem and the Council of Nicaea. In that period only local councils of bishops met, and their decisions were regarded as binding on all churches only to the extent to which different local councils agreed with each other.

OBJECTIONS TO THE ADEQUACY OF THE TWIN CRITERIA

The claim that God has guided the Church to interpret the original revelation correctly is subject to the objection that political forces have often influenced Councils and Popes in proclaiming this doctrine rather than that. That such forces have often had a significant influence cannot be doubted. Irrational forces have so often influenced human decisions on other matters also, including their decisions to proclaim conclusions on matters of secular history and science. But the claim of divine influence over the Church's interpretation of doctrine need be only minimally the claim that where such irrational forces would have forced the Church to adopt false interpretations of doctrine on very fundamental matters, God has enabled enough Church leaders to see that theological considerations favour a different interpretation, so as to prevent the Church being saddled permanently with false interpretations. That is quite compatible with God allowing political influences to be decisive on occasions when they inclined the Church to reach interpretations which were true. Those who hold that all official doctrinal definitions are revisable (e.g. the Orthodox, if they claim among the tests that a council is an Ecumenical Council is its widespread acceptance by the Church, so that any definition proclaimed by a council can be shown subsequently not to have been proclaimed by a proper council) are not committed to the view that divine influence guided Councils or Popes on any one particular occasion—or would have guided them otherwise had they been inclined to promulgate

false doctrine, but only that it guided the general drift of theological interpretation over the centuries. And who, looking at the history of theology, could deny that argument, reflection, and prayer, as well as irrational political forces, have played a significant role in the formation of Christian doctrine? The argument to show that God has determined the influence of such argument, reflection, and prayer, whether through natural processes or by intervention in them, sufficiently to prevent the establishment of false doctrine on fundamental matters must, in view of the impossibility of determining directly just how much different factors influenced different Church leaders at moments of history long ago, proceed by a different route. It must proceed via evidence that there is a God able and willing to intervene in history, evidence of the Resurrection that he would preserve doctrine in a church, and the prior probability of the doctrines which that Church proclaimed (e.g. of the doctrine of the Incarnation), as well as any more direct historical evidence from the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

Besides my twin pairs of criteria for the true Church of connectedness and continuity of doctrine and organization, two other tests have been suggested in the history of Christianity. The first is purity of life. If Christ founded a church to be his 'body' in the world, one would expect it to evince his holy life; a body which failed to do so, the suggestion goes, could hardly be the Church. This issue was raised in an acute form by Donatism in the fourth century AD.⁷⁰ The Donatists claimed that a 'church' which tolerated unworthy bishops and other officers ceased to be part of the true Church, and that they themselves had that purity which made them the true Church. Since that time, many other sects have arisen, claiming on grounds of sanctity of life that the main body had unchurched itself through impurity, and that they alone had the purity to make them the true Church. Now certainly if a 'church' ceased to teach seriously holiness of life, it would indeed fail to be the true Church—this follows from the criterion of continuity of doctrine. For obviously a crucial part of doctrine concerns the worthwhileness of living a holy life. And if a 'church' taught that seriously, it would tend to make its members more prone to pursue such a life than they would otherwise be. So 'puritans' are right to demand that to be a true Church, a body must be a sanctifying body. But to demand that the members of the Church be fully sanctified before they become members would

⁷⁰ For Donatism and other 'puritan' movements of the early Church, see S. L. Greenslade, *Schism in the Early Church* (SCM Press, 1953), ch. 6.

be to deny the role of the Church as a sanctifying agent; you can only make holy what is not already holy. To demand that the Church be a society of saints is to refuse to allow it one of its all-important roles, of moulding sinners who choose to be moulded into saints. (To demand sanctity with respect to officers alone would be to refuse to recognize that they too are members on the way to sanctification, and so to make a division between officers and other members far sharper than the history of Christian doctrine could possibly warrant.)

The other suggested criterion for the true Church is the test of miracles: that the Church's authority be established by many continuing miracles, in a way that its original authority was established by the miracle of the Resurrection. There is a New Testament passage that claims that such miracles will be the signs of the Church,⁷¹ and passages which claim that the Church was characterized by such miracles in its very early years.⁷² Such evidence would reinforce a church's claim to authority, and from time to time ecclesial bodies have claimed some miraculous backing for their work. But clearly later miracles are not as vital for authenticating revelation (though no doubt desirable for other reasons) as the original miracle of the Resurrection. For if a church is recognized as such through the original miracle, its later manifestations can be recognized as such by the criteria of connectedness and continuity of doctrine and organization with the earlier Church. And too much evident miracle would bring people into the Church for the wrong reasons, as I argued in Chapter 6. That said, some none too evident miracles are perhaps to be expected in connection with the Church, and certainly the occurrence of miracles will reinforce a body's claim to be the Church.

⁷¹ Mark: 16: 17–18, part of the 'longer ending' added on to the last chapter of St Mark's Gospel.

⁷² e.g. Acts 5: 15–16.

9

Theological Definitions

So, then, later bodies teach how the original revelation is to be interpreted; and one criterion, but not the only criterion, of an ecclesial body being a part of the Church just is the proper derivability (in the way which I have analysed) of its interpretations of the original revelation. The original revelation and any later documents purporting to interpret it will be subject to the complexities of interpretation involved in human language which I laid out in Part I. In this chapter I draw out the consequences of these complexities for theological definitions: that is, doctrinal statements on metaphysical and historical matters, such as those contained in the Nicene Creed, concerned with the nature of God and his actions in the world. I will discuss in Chapter 10 how the Church's claim for the authority of the Bible should be understood, and in Chapter 11 how we should understand statements concerned with the morality of different kinds of actions. I shall also seek to show that those doctrines which are sufficiently central to Christian tradition to be regarded (even on a very wide understanding of 'the Church') as central Christian doctrines are properly derivable from the original revelation. I have already argued this (in illustrating the concept of proper derivability) in respect of those doctrines of the Nicene Creed which are most remote in content from the Scripture from which they were derived. The other doctrines of the Nicene Creed (the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the Parousia or second coming of Jesus, and such like) are expounded with the same or very similar expressions to those found in the New Testament, and so their derivability from the 'deposit of faith' which the Church recognized as containing the original revelation is thus far less contestable. But I shall argue in Chapter 10 for the proper derivability of the Church's claim for the authority of the Bible, and in Chapter 11 for the proper derivability of some statements concerned with the morality of different kinds of actions. And I shall also argue that these latter doctrines are not too improbable on evidence other than the evidence

that they have been revealed, and so that in this respect a church which proclaims them satisfies the fourth test for being part of the Church.

Expositions of Christian doctrine in creeds¹ and official definitions seek to lay it out as precisely and clearly as possible. The genre of such documents is thus clear; in them the whole is true if and only if each sentence is true. Such teaching was issued by groups of humans at a particular time in their own name, and it is therefore their understanding of their teaching which we need to elucidate. What I mean by 'in their own name' is that, while of course these humans are claiming to tell us what is the content of God's revelation (which in their view they have God's authority to do), they do not purport to record God's word—only their understanding of what that word meant. Creeds, therefore, cannot be supposed to contain hidden meanings which contemporaries cannot understand but which future generations might come to understand. As we shall see in Chapter 10, there is a contrast in this respect with what Church Councils and the Fathers taught about the Bible. The Bible was God's word to people of many centuries, and for that reason it might be that no one would understand parts of it until some future time.

SCIENTIFIC AND HISTORICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Doctrinal claims will sometimes be expressed using false presuppositions, scientific and historical. They may presuppose that the sun, stars, and planets spin daily from east to west round the Earth and that the sun and the planets travel among the 'fixed stars' with more complex motions over longer periods; that there are no planets, let alone planets inhabited by rational creatures, beyond the solar system; that humans did not evolve from lower animals, but were created directly by God, either *ex nihilo* or by 'breathing life into the dust of the ground';² that the Earth is only a few thousand years old; and other doctrines of ancient and medieval science. Although such presuppositions are often made

¹ Creeds typically begin with the words 'I' (or 'We') 'believe in' certain things; and to believe *in* certain things is not the same as to believe that these things are so. To believe *in* God is not the same as to believe that there is a God. On this, see my *Faith and Reason*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2005), esp. ch. 4. Nevertheless, those who put the creeds forward for recitation at baptism and in worship were announcing as the official doctrine of the Church that what the believer is to put his belief in is in fact so.

² Gen. 2: 7.

in the writings of theologians, relatively seldom do they get into creeds and official definitions. Perhaps this is because the latter need to be precise and to include only things essential for belief, and unnecessary assumptions therefore get weeded out. One exception to this, and not one usually noticed by those who say the words, is the claim of the Apostles' Creed that God the Father Almighty is the creator 'of Heaven and Earth'.³ By 'heaven' (οὐρανός, *caelum*) was meant 'the sky': that is, that region in which moon, sun, and planets moved against the background of the fixed stars. 'οὐρανός' did not mean for the writers of early centuries what it means for us: namely, the home of the blessed after death. Most writers did, however, hold that the abode of the blessed was in or (more often) beyond the sky. Those who recite the Creed today tend, I suspect, to think that they are affirming God as creator of this world (the physical universe we live in now, the Earth, and, by implication, all that surrounds it) and another world (the home of the blessed after death). But although the ancients had very many different views about the nature of οὐρανός, they virtually all thought of it as a realm surrounding or overarching the Earth,⁴ where things behave differently from how they behave on Earth. The physical universe consisted of two parts: οὐρανός and Earth. In our way of thinking it does not: it consists of innumerable stars and planets, of which the Earth is one small one.

Yet, in putting the phrase 'οὐρανός and Earth' in the creed, the authors were not making a point about the constitution of the physical universe. One can see this by the fact that there was available no rival account of it to the very general ancient view sketched above. It was just their way of putting a point which could have been put, less committedly, by describing God as the creator of the physical universe; in view of their belief about the nature of that, they naturally described it as 'οὐρανός and Earth'.

³ The final form of the Apostles' Creed, used very frequently in the Church's worship and often as a test for the admission of candidates to baptism, may be as late as the eighth century. It is a variant of the 'old Roman creed', to be dated to the second century. The phrase 'creator of Heaven and Earth' is not in the old Roman creed, but is in a number of early creeds. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, 1950), 372–4.

⁴ οὐρανός was, however, generally regarded as a complicated place with many 'layers' to it, as it were. See e.g. St John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, 2. 6. Tatian places 'Paradise', the abode of the blessed, 'above' Heaven. By contrast, Theophilus of Antioch placed it on Earth, in a favoured region in the East. On the last two writers see J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 393.

Although their presuppositions can, as we saw in Chapter 2, be removed from creeds and other doctrinal statements without too much difficulty, creeds and other doctrinal statements were inevitably addressed to those questions which concerned people of the time and say which of their answers to those questions were correct, without necessarily enabling us to say which of our answers to our questions are correct. Thus the Nicene Creed has an expanded version of the phrase which I have just been discussing, and expresses its belief in God the Father Almighty ‘maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible’. The expanded phrase makes the point that God created not merely the physical universe, but as well anything non-physical which may exist—for instance, angels and the souls of the departed. What it claims is clear in so far as it is clear what counts as a ‘thing’. But, as we saw in Chapter 5, that is not at all clear. Certainly, if there are angels and souls of the departed, then angels and souls of the departed count as things, and so one who believes the Creed believes that God created them; they do not exist under their own powers. So much is uncontroversial. But are space and time, or numbers or logical relations, things? The authors of the Creed probably did not give much, if any, attention to such issues. Such ‘things’ were not what they were talking about; and so even if we do think of time or the number 23 as things, we must not read the Creed as affirming that God created them. Creeds are to be read as choosing only between answers currently available—for example, that the physical universe was uncreated, or that it was created by God.

Inevitably, each new formulation of doctrine raises further questions not raised by the discussions which gave rise to the original formula. If Christ has two natures, as the Council of Chalcedon declared, does it follow that he has two separate wills? The century following the Council of Chalcedon tried to answer that question. More generally, the meaning of all technical terms will need clarification in terms of the interests and concerns of each new generation. The arguments of Chapter 2 suggest that the process of clarification is an unending one.

Sometimes, however, declarations of lesser (mainly Protestant) councils as well as individual theologians have wanted to say that such matters as the age and size of the universe were part of the content, as opposed to the temporary framework, of revelation. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the nineteenth century saw two well-known controversies, in which scientific discoveries undermined the presuppositions of biblical writers about such matters. The controversy of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries concerned whether the Earth was stationary and the sun, moon, planets, and stars travelled around it; and the controversy of the nineteenth century concerned the age of the Earth and whether humans have evolved by a gradual process from lower animals over many millennia. The reason why some supposed that the Christian Revelation contained a view of these matters was because the Bible presupposed and sometimes seemed explicitly to affirm a view about them. But presupposition must be distinguished from content, and just how the Bible is to be read in respect of its 'affirmations' is a matter of some controversy, which will be discussed in the next chapter. As we shall see there, earlier centuries were far less 'literalistic' in their reading of the Bible, and so less inclined to regard scientific matters as part of its content. It is for this reason that the only controversies between science and the Bible which produced theological controversy, and had a wide impact on the community, were those of recent centuries. But the clashes between the view of the Bible and the Greek science believed by many of the Christian Fathers would have given rise to controversies just as acute as those of later centuries if early centuries had read the Bible as literally as did later ones. The Old Testament certainly assumes that the Earth is flat and rests on 'foundations'—Greek science knew that it was spherical and floated in empty space. Genesis says that on the second day of creation 'God made the dome, and separated the waters that were under the dome, from the waters that were above the dome.'⁵ Greek science believed that all water was to be found in the sublunary region, and certainly under the 'dome' of Heaven formed by the background of the 'fixed stars'. And so on. But until the fifteenth century such conflicts did not have wide impact, because Church authorities were prepared in general not to insist that science and the history of the Earth and the universe formed part of the content of revelation, and they allowed that it was permissible to hold different views on these matters.

The declaration of the Holy Office in 1616 that 'the double motion of the Earth about its axis and about the sun is false, and entirely contrary to Holy Scripture'⁶ was the Catholic church's only official proclamation declaring a theological orthodoxy on matters concerning the age, size, or detailed mode of operation of the universe. In issuing this

⁵ Gen. 1: 7.

⁶ See e.g. A. D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, i (Dover Publications, 1960), 137–8.

declaration, the Catholic church was certainly not treating its content as 'all-important' in my terminology; there was no suggestion that it was in any way infallible, and was not even issued by the Pope, only by his Office. It was of course a most unfortunate declaration, and was quietly abandoned at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Darwinian theory of evolution was formally opposed by smaller Protestant bodies, but in general the larger ones made no formal condemnations. Despite the event of 1616, Protestantism is more at risk from such scientific discoveries, since the discoveries cause most problems in respect of their clashes with the Bible. Protestantism has often claimed that the Bible is to be read without using the tradition of the Church as to how it is to be interpreted; so the latter cannot be invoked to remove apparent conflicts with scientific or historical discoveries.

UNIVOCITY IN THEOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS

Once we have siphoned off their presuppositions from creeds and other theological definitions and noted that they cannot be read directly as taking a position with respect to views not even heard of, we must bear in mind that such definitions contain much metaphor and analogy. Some credal sentences are to be understood with normal meanings, and some of them with literal meanings analogical to normal meanings, and some of them metaphorically. The occurrence of metaphor and analogy is to be expected in view of the fact that theology makes claims about transcendent matters, but must perforce use ordinary human words given their meaning originally by their applicability to very ordinary mundane goings-on. Yet it is possible for ordinary words to be applied in quite new circumstances in normal senses. When a ball is said to have a diameter of 1 metre, a galaxy to have a diameter of 300,000 light-years, and an atomic nucleus to have a diameter of 10^{-14} metres, 'diameter' is being used in exactly the same sense throughout. So too is 'cause', when an explosion is said to cause the disintegration of a galaxy, or the way someone talks is said to cause his hearers to be annoyed. It is just that the diameters are of very different lengths, not that the meaning of 'diameter' is in any way different; and that the kind of cause, not the meaning of 'cause', is different. All this follows from the results of Chapter 3. It does, however, require some careful analysis to see when words or longer expressions in theological assertions are being used (in comparison with their mundane senses) univocally,

when they are being used analogically, and when they are being used metaphorically. By considering what else those who devised, expounded, and assented to the theological definitions said on other occasions, we can normally form a reasonable understanding of whether they intended particular expressions to be understood univocally or in an analogical sense or in a new, metaphorical sense. I will now give examples of univocal, analogical, and metaphorical uses of expressions in creeds and other doctrinal definitions, and show the grounds for classifying some expression in one way rather than another. The rules for making these distinctions which I outlined in Chapter 3 entail that we take a word in its normal sense in the absence of contrary reasons; and that we should interpret a word (or longer expression) as metaphorical only if we cannot plausibly regard it as being used in any literal sense.

The ancient creeds all talk of God or the Father as *omnipotens*, or παντοκράτωρ, normally translated as ‘all-powerful’, ‘omnipotent’, or ‘almighty’; and however exactly this is to be spelled out so as to avoid certain logical paradoxes, it clearly involved God as being very ‘powerful’. Less frequently, he is referred to as ‘perfect’ or ‘good’, and said to be ‘wise’ and ‘to know all things’.⁷ By my criteria, the uses of ‘good’, ‘wise’, and ‘powerful’ in their application to God come out as univocal with their uses in application to humans. ‘Wise’ is used in the same sense in ‘God is wise’ as in ‘Socrates is wise’. There are the same synonyms, ‘knows many things’ and ‘understands many things’, and the same contraries, ‘ignorant’ and ‘foolish’, the same determinates and determinables. Likewise, a speaker who says ‘God is wise’ will acknowledge that ‘wise’ applies also to paradigm examples of wise humans such as Plato and Aristotle. Of course, there are differences in what wisdom amounts to in God from what it amounts to in humans. God’s wisdom, all theologians believed, is essential to him, and is not the result of learning. But if ‘God is wise’ entails ‘God is essentially wise’, whereas ‘Socrates is wise’ does not entail ‘Socrates is essentially wise’,

⁷ Thus the creed of the Council of Nicaea affirms belief in the ‘Father almighty’ (παντοκράτωρ) (Tanner, 5), and the old Roman creed affirms belief in the ‘Father omnipotent’ (*omnipotens*) (Denzinger, 30). The First Vatican Council spoke of God as *intellectu ac voluntate omnique perfectione infinitum*, ‘infinite in intellect and will and all perfection’ (Tanner, 805). The ‘Tome of Damasus’ spoke of it being a heresy to deny that the Son, like the Father, *omnia posse, omnia nosse*, ‘is able to do everything, and knows everything’ (Denzinger, 164). The Third Council of Toledo (AD 589) spoke of the ‘goodness’ (*bonitas*) of the Trinity (Denzinger, 470). And, to take a very recent example, an encyclical of Pope Pius XII spoke of God as ‘most wise’ (*sapientissimus*) (Denzinger, 3781).

the difference does not arise because 'wise' has different senses when applied to God and when applied to Socrates. Rather, the entailment arises because of the meaning of the word 'God'. 'God' is a word used to denote a kind of being who cannot but be wise. (The entailment arises either because ' x is God' by itself entails ' x is essentially wise', or because it entails 'if x is wise, then he is essentially wise', which, conjoined to ' x is wise', yields ' x is essentially wise'.) A similar point applies if 'God's wisdom is not the result of learning' is entailed by 'God is wise'. These entailments do not arise from 'wise' being used of God in a special sense; the contributions of 'wise' to the meaning of 'God is wise' and 'Socrates is wise' are just the same.

Duns Scotus affirmed, as I do, that such terms as 'good', 'wise', and 'powerful' are used univocally of God and man. He defines a word as univocal if it has sufficient unity in itself to serve as the middle term of a valid syllogism (e.g. ' φ ' is univocal if from 'All φ s are ψ ' and 'All χ s are φ ', you can deduce 'all χ s are ψ ', and similarly for other sentences in which ' φ ' occurs as middle term), and if it cannot be affirmed and denied of the same thing without contradiction.⁸ By these tests, 'wise' comes out as univocal with its literal use in its application to God. From 'God is wise' and 'Anyone who is wise knows that man is mortal', it follows that 'God knows that man is mortal'; and the same goes if you substitute 'Socrates' for 'God'. And likewise for 'good' and 'powerful'. 'Although it seems to me that Scotus's tests for univocity are not strong enough,⁹ they are of the same logical type as mine. Scotus was clearly attempting to elucidate the same kind of understanding of univocity as I am.

Not so Aquinas. Aquinas claimed that predicates such as 'good', 'wise', and 'powerful' were being used analogically of God in comparison with their use of humans.¹⁰ (He also claimed that these predicates were being

⁸ Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, 1 dist. 3, q. 1; *Opus Oxoniense*, 1. 3. 2. 5–6, trans. in A. Wolter, *Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings* (Hackett, 1987), 20.

⁹ See Janice Thomas, 'Univocity and Understanding God's Nature', in G. J. Hughes (ed.), *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology* (Search Press, 1987), 90–2.

¹⁰ 'It is impossible to predicate anything univocally of God and creatures' (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 13. 5). The divine predicates 'good', 'wise', etc. are used, he held, 'analogically', and more specifically in his terminology, by analogy of proper proportionality. (On the 'literal' use of these predicates in reference to God, see *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 13. 3.) James Ross also holds that both 'wise' and 'powerful' are used of God only analogically (*Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 170–1), but he does not give any detailed argument for this. He allows that other words in religious discourse are often used either univocally or equivocally with normal senses.

used *proprie*—that is, in my sense ‘literally’.) Aquinas’s reasons for denying univocity arise from various metaphysical and epistemological doctrines which are highly dubious if seen as doctrines about analogy of the kind with which I have been concerned. Among the metaphysical doctrines are the doctrine that words are univocal only if they denote properties in beings which belong to the same genus, or at any rate have the same mode of existence. Among the epistemological doctrines is the doctrine that concepts are abstracted from images (*phantasmata*) derived from sensible things, and so our language is tied in meaning by its applicability to sensible things.¹¹ Such claims of Aquinas seem quite inadequately justified if Aquinas’s sense of ‘analogy’ is anything like mine. Words which denote properties in beings of different genera may be univocal (in my sense of ‘univocal’), and how we derive our understanding of the sense of a word does not have such a direct relation to what that sense is. We may learn what a word means by learning the syntactic criteria for its application and observing objects to which it paradigmatically applies; and this may allow us to ascribe it in the same sense to objects which we cannot observe. However, by these doctrines Aquinas may be elucidating rather different senses of ‘univocal’ and ‘analogical’ from mine.

Two recent papers have defended the view that the divine predicates—‘good’, ‘wise’, and so on—are used analogically of God with respect to their use of humans on grounds other than the metaphysico-epistemological doctrines of Aquinas. G. J. Hughes claims that, while argument leads us to use such predicates as ‘good’ of God and thus to affirm a resemblance between a divine property and human goodness, ‘we are unable to state in what this resemblance consists. It “transcends our mode of expression” because God transcends our way of existing’; ‘we do not have a grasp of the truth conditions’ for applying such descriptions to God.¹² Now there are senses of ‘state in what this resemblance consists’ and ‘grasp the truth conditions’ in which what Hughes says is false. God being ‘wise’, like Socrates being ‘wise’, involves knowing and understanding many things, and the truth-conditions of his being ‘wise’ are that he does know and understand many things. But there are of course also senses of the expressions in which what

¹¹ For elaboration and criticism of Aquinas’s reasons for denying univocity, see Patrick Sherry, ‘Analogy Today’, *Philosophy*, 51 (1976), 431–46; esp. 438–46.

¹² G. J. Hughes, ‘Aquinas and the Limits of Agnosticism’, in Hughes (ed.), *Philosophical Assessment of Theology*; see 48 and 51.

Hughes says is true. We do not know what it is like to be God, how God knows things, or from which (if any) deeper properties of God his wisdom derives. But then we do not know what it is like to be a bat, how a bat 'perceives' objects, and from which (if any) deeper properties of being a bat its sensory abilities emerge. But we can still truly say, 'Bats perceive', and in doing so use the word 'perceive' univocally with its use in 'Humans perceive'.

Janice Thomas suggests that the divine predicates applied to God 'may have real senses none of us know';¹³ there may be an analogous sense of the word 'wise' which applies to God, and is known only to God. The senses of scientific terms are matters for experts. If we use them, we use them with whatever sense an expert would use them, even if we do not know what that sense is. God is the supreme expert on his own nature. So, she claims, if we say that God is 'wise', we must mean to use the word in his sense, and that *may* be at best analogous with our normal sense. Now God may indeed have a property such that, if he decides to call it the property of being 'wise', he would be using the word 'wise' in a sense analogous to the normal sense. But when creeds claim that God is 'wise', are they using a word like 'entropy' of which many of us do not really know the meaning but on which we rely on an expert's authority? Or are they claiming that God is 'wise' in a sense in which we understand the term? I suggest that they are doing the latter. For those who formulate creeds want to be understood, and so they use words with senses as clear as they can get. They take over such words from their use in debates between theists and atheists about whether there is a God, in explicating what the disagreement between them amounts to. The theist, if his belief that there is a God is to have any content, if he is to argue with and convert others, must have a grasp of and be able to explain what that belief amounts to; so must those whom he seeks to convince of the truth of that belief. And so the theist explains that to say that there is a God is to say that there is an all-wise, all-powerful, perfectly good, and free creator and sustainer of the world, or something similar thereto. But this exposition would not amount to anything, and so the claim that there is a God would not have any substance, unless the words in terms of which it is expounded are given senses in a way which does not already assume the existence of such a being. For only so would theist and atheist know about what they disagreed.

¹³ Thomas, 'Univocity', 94.

ANALOGY IN THEOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS

While the divine predicates—‘good’, ‘wise’, ‘powerful’—are used of God in their literal senses, there seem to be plenty of words which are used in creeds (in my sense) analogically of God. First, there are words which imply passion. God is said to ‘show’ or to be likely to ‘show’ ‘anger’,¹⁴ to ‘feel pity’, and to ‘love’.¹⁵ All of these verbs of emotion seem to involve (as part of their meaning) not just belief (e.g. with anger, that someone has done wrong) and a tendency to action (i.e. acting unless there is reason not to act—e.g. with anger, acting to hurt the wrongdoer unless there is reason not to do so), but also desire (inclination to action despite contrary reason), and even bodily sensation. No one is really angry or feels pity or love unless they feel these things in their stomach or breasts or bowels or behind the eyes, and have an urge, hard to control, to vent their anger or show their pity and love. But from its earliest times Christian theology has affirmed vigorously and constantly that (except when he became incarnate in Jesus) God has no body, and has no inclination to act contrary to reason; hence the use of such words about God (when not incarnate in Jesus) in official Christian pronouncements must be so interpreted that they do not carry these latter elements of meaning. ‘Angry’ in both ‘God is angry’ and ‘John is angry’ has as synonyms both ‘enraged’ and ‘furious’ (though in the former sentence these words are of course used only by analogy with their normal use); but only ‘angry’ in ‘God is angry’ has as a synonym ‘believes wrong has been done and seeks to right it unless there is reason not to do so’, and only ‘angry’ in ‘John is angry’ has as a synonym ‘believes wrong has been done and feels an urge to right it’.

For the same reason that God has no body, other words which must be understood in non-normal senses when used of God (when not incarnate in Jesus) are words which imply the use of bodily organs to acquire knowledge or perform actions. If words like ‘command’ or ‘move’ used in a normal sense imply the use of bodily organs (e.g. that if someone ‘commands’, they do so with a mouth, and if they move

¹⁴ e.g., the Geneva Confession of 1536 affirms that man by himself ‘can only expect the anger and malediction of God’ (Pelikan and Hotchkiss, ii. 314). I have replaced their ‘wrath’ by the more modern word ‘anger’.

¹⁵ The Westminster Confession of 1647, despite claiming God to be ‘without passions’, speaks of him as ‘most loving, gracious, merciful ... hating all sin’ (ibid., ii. 608.)

something, they do it with an arm or some other bodily organ), then there is always a readily understandable analogical sense in which there is no such implication. To command in this sense is just to issue an instruction by some means or other, and to move in this sense is just to cause to change position by some means or other.¹⁶ Such senses of words from which any bodily entailments are removed are readily understandable analogical senses of the words, which can be and have been applied to beings other than God (e.g. angels or ghosts); and so we may consider them as now being literal senses—even if the senses were metaphorical when originally introduced.

Likewise, words which imply spatial position cannot apply to God (when not incarnate) in a normal sense—since if God (when not incarnate) has no body, it follows that he also (in a normal sense) has no spatial position. The Nicene Creed expresses belief in Christ who ‘came down’ (κατελθόντα) ‘from the heavens’ (ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν), ‘ascended into the heavens’, and ‘sits on the right hand’ of the Father. Taken literally, the first claim entails that the pre-incarnate Christ had a spatial location from which he came down. But the Lateran Council of AD 649 held that Christ was *circumscriptum corpore, incircumscriptum deitate*¹⁷—that is, there was a spatial boundary to his human body, but none to his deity. Hence, before taking a human nature and a human body, he cannot have been in a normal sense in one place rather than another; so ‘came down’ cannot be read literally. But ‘coming down’ means ‘occupying a lower position’; and by the customs of the ancient world as well as ours, a low position indicates smallness of status and power. Christ’s ‘descent’ was his taking on human limitations, including a human body with the limitations on what could be done and known through it. So too, therefore, ‘from the heavens’ must be read as ‘from being God alone’. The third claim, that Christ ‘sits on the right hand’ of the Father, taken in a normal sense, entails that the (non-incarnate) Father has a spatial location, on the right hand of which sits the Son. But as the Father has no spatial location, he has no right hand in a literal sense. But there is a clear established analogical sense, suggested by the customs both of the ancient world and of our own, that the place at the right of the president of a meeting is the place for an honoured guest or immediate subordinate, so that ‘being at the right hand’ of someone

¹⁶ On this point see e.g. W. P. Alston, ‘Can we Speak Literally of God?’, repr. in his *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Cornell University Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Denzinger, 504.

is sharing their honour and acting on their behalf. So the claim of the Creed is that Christ now exercises his glory and reigns alongside the Father without in his incarnate nature being subject to the limitations of ordinary humans.¹⁸ Although the second claim, that Christ 'ascended', could be read in a normal sense as claiming that he went up into the sky (the literal *ὤρᾱνός*), since—the traditional Christian belief is—he retained his human body. But that wouldn't on its own be a very religiously significant claim. It is natural, therefore, to understand it in the light of the parallel with his 'coming down', as the claim that he divested himself of his earthly limitations. This is compatible with this being symbolized by his rising into the sky (the literal *ὤρᾱνός*),¹⁹ and being covered by a cloud²⁰ at the end of his earthly ministry, as is claimed by St Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

Medieval philosophers saw a further element of analogy in all ascriptions of actions and awareness to God. They held that God is outside time; so, to speak strictly, he does what he does, and knows what he knows, all at one timeless instant which is neither before nor simultaneous with nor after any instant on our or any other time scale. So when the Fourth Lateran Council (AD 1215) declared that the Holy Trinity 'gave the doctrine of salvation to the human race first through Moses and the holy prophets',²¹ the 'gave' (*tribuit*) was, it held, not to be understood as indicating that his giving occurred at any moment of time; it was only the effect of his timeless giving which occurred at any particular moment or moments of time. To understand a verb of action in the past tense as not describing a past action is clearly to use the word in this tense in an analogical sense. The past tense of a verb of action or awareness used of God has in common with the past tense of such a verb used of humans that the effect of the action or that of which the subject was aware lies in the past; but there is the difference that the action or the awareness itself lies in the timeless present when God is the subject,

¹⁸ The analogical understanding of Christ's session at the right hand was clearly expounded by Augustine in the century in which the Creed was promulgated. See his *Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, ch. 7. In his previous chapter, 6, Augustine acknowledges that Christ's human body was taken into Heaven. But he is agnostic about 'where and in what manner the Lord's body is in Heaven'.

¹⁹ Luke 24: 51.

²⁰ Acts 1: 9.

²¹ Tanner, 230. I do not think that the authors of early creeds thought in this way; and I do not myself endorse this timeless reading of tensed verbs ascribing actions or awareness to God. See my *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. edn. (Clarendon Press, 1993), ch. 12.

but in the past when a human is the subject. Hence some synonyms will be the same, and some will differ in the two cases; and so on.

Clearly theology, in talking of God as 'good' and 'wise' and acting in the world, is using a whole system of person predicates. It is using the model of a person for its talk about God, in the way in which science uses the model of a wave for its thought about light (as I analysed it, in Ch. 4). God is often said to be 'personal'; and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are described as the three 'persons' of the Trinity. But theology normally makes a very sharp distinction between God the Holy Trinity (and/or each 'person' of the Trinity—I take this extra clause as read in the remaining passages below where its insertion would be appropriate) on the one hand and human persons on the other, which leads me to say not merely that it is claiming that God is a very different sort of person from us, but that he is only a 'person' in an analogical sense. This difference is that it seems to me to be part of the meaning of 'person' in the normal sense that the identity of a person is independent of gain or loss of beliefs or powers. I do not cease to be the same person simply in virtue of losing some beliefs or some powers; personal identity persists through (at any rate minor) alterations even of personality; it is what underlies these accidental features. But on the traditional view of God common to Christian theologians from earliest Christian times, his omniscience (knowing all true propositions), omnipotence (being able to do anything logically possible), and perfect freedom (his purposes not in any way being influenced by forces from outside himself) are properties essential to his identity. He would cease to be the same 'person' if he ceased to be omniscient or omnipotent. And not merely that, but if a being ceased to be omnipotent or omniscient, that being would never at any time have been God. A letter of Pope Leo makes this point by asserting, in reference to such divine properties as being wise or just, that 'whatever in any way is worthily ascribed to God is not an attribute of him, but his essence'.²² So, while 'person' as used of humans is synonymous with 'subject of powers, purposes and beliefs, whose identity is not constituted by which ones he or she has', 'person' as used of God is synonymous merely with 'subject of powers, purposes and beliefs'. (His essential omnipotence etc. entails that his identity is constituted at least in part by the nature and extent of these powers, purposes, and beliefs.) 'Person' therefore, as used of humans is being used analogically with respect to God.

²² Denzinger, 285.

So we need to talk about God not merely with the model of a person (in the sense in which humans are persons, particular substances) but with some other model—for instance, the model of a supreme form or essence, or the model of a law of nature, which is the law it is because of the powers it involves. Plato held that the Forms or ‘ideas’, the essences of things, outside the world of change determine how particular changing substances behave; and he suggested that there was a supreme Form, the Form of the Good. Influenced by Plato, some of the early Christian Fathers thought of God as this Form of the Good; and this, taken without qualification, would involve thinking of God as nothing but a changeless impersonal principle.²³ The modern equivalent of such a timeless principle is (on one understanding of ‘law’) a law of nature. The law of gravity that all physical objects attract each other with forces proportional to mm'/r^2 would not be the same law if it had a different effect on objects. And if it was really a *fundamental* law of nature (and not a regularity which holds only under certain conditions, or one which holds only because God allows it to hold), and was a reality independent of the physical objects which are constrained to act in accord with it, then it must hold for ever. Any law of this kind which ceased to hold or changed its mode of operation would never have been a fundamental principle governing nature.²⁴ But surely Christians never really wanted to say that God was nothing but a Form or Law; he is an active agent, distinct from us, and for this reason properly called a different particular thing, a different substance, from us. Rather, we need this sort of model of God as a Form or Law to qualify the model of God as a person (in the ordinary sense), in the way in which the particle model qualifies the wave model of light, to give us our limited understanding of what God is like.

²³ Augustine urged (in *De Trinitate*, 7. 5) that God is ‘improperly’ called ‘substance’ but ‘properly’ called ‘essence’. Following Augustine, medieval philosophy normally claimed not merely that God is essentially omnipotent, etc., but that God is the *same thing as* each of his properties (e.g. omniscience) and so that they are the same thing as each other. This is a difficult notion of which to make sense, but I think that there is a sense in which this is a coherent and indeed plausible claim—see my *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), ch. 7.

²⁴ This way of understanding the notion of a law of nature is one given precise form by the work of D. M. Armstrong, Michael Tooley, and F. Dretske. See e.g., D. M. Armstrong, *What is a Law of Nature?* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). For my objection to this as the correct way of construing the laws of nature of our universe, see my ‘Relations between Universals, or Divine Laws?’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (2006), 179–89.

METAPHOR IN THEOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS

I have claimed that there are literal senses of words which do not imply passion or the use of bodily organs, and of 'person' in which the identity of the person is constituted by his powers, purposes, and beliefs, senses analogous to the normal senses of these words. Although it may be that the words in these senses have been used only of God, they have been used in various contexts. It is characteristic of a metaphorical sense of a word that it is created by its context; and that this sense may bear little similarity to the literal sense. Inevitably there is a wide boundary between the 'analogical' and the 'metaphorical' in my senses of these words; but I shall now describe senses of words used in creeds and official definitions which seem to me to lie on the metaphorical side of the boundary, new senses created by a particular context which mean that we must read the definitions which contain them in a metaphorical way.

A word ' φ ' is being used in a 'metaphorical' sense, the reader will recall, if it is being used not to designate φ things but rather to designate a feature believed to be distinctive of the objects, activities, or whatever denoted by ' φ ' in one of its literal senses (a feature which belongs necessarily to those objects, etc., or contingently, or is generally believed to belong, or is suggested by the objects). Different contexts will often make different features distinctive. My first example of a metaphorical use of words in a doctrinal definition is the Nicene Creed's statement about Christ that he is 'light from light' ($\varphi\omega\varsigma\ \epsilon\kappa\ \varphi\omega\tau\omicron\varsigma$).²⁵ Clearly, those who formulated the Creed were not claiming that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, is light in a normal sense. They did not think that he consists of whatever it is that light in the normal sense is made of. Nor were they using 'light' to mean some non-physical stuff somewhat like light, in an analogical sense which could be found in a dictionary. 'Light' does have an analogical meaning: when we talk of some discovery 'throwing light' on something else, we mean that it helps us to understand that something else, in the way in which light helps us to see things. But when Christ is said to be light, something much more is meant than that he helps us to 'see' deep things as they really are—although that is certainly involved. It is rather that he is

²⁵ Tanner, 24.

everywhere at once, just as light seems to travel from one place to another with infinite velocity. As light spreads itself in all directions without ceasing to illuminate places already illuminated, and so there seems to be an infinite quantity of it, so too there is no limit to the power and wisdom of Christ. As Christ is 'light from light', so, as one candle is lit by another without the latter losing any of its illuminating power, he derives his illuminating power from God the Father, who also is light. All of that is involved; but to understand it, we need to do more than look up $\varphi\omega\varsigma$ in a Greek dictionary. We need to know the background of Christian thought about light in biblical passages (especially Christ's claim in St John's Gospel to be 'the light of the world'²⁶), the role of the sun in some pagan religions, the use of 'light' in Gnostic thought, and the beliefs of ancient science about light. Knowing all that, we see the point of the metaphor.

Talk in all creeds of the first person of the Holy Trinity as 'the Father' should perhaps be classified as analogical with the normal sense. Clearly the first person of the Trinity is not supposed to be a 'father' of anyone in a normal sense—he does not beget anyone through sexual generation, for he has no body. But he is like a human father in being the source of the existence of his son; and like a good human father in loving and caring for his son. In this already established analogical sense some pre-Christian writer could talk of Pericles being the father of the city of Athens. But when the second person of the Trinity is called 'the Son', who was 'begotten' by 'the Father', 'not made', I am inclined to suggest, a metaphorical sense of 'Son' is being used. For the sense in which the second person is caused to exist by the Father, and so is his 'Son', is in no way similar to normal 'begetting'. The difference is not merely that there is no sexual generation involved, and so no mother jointly responsible for the existence of the Son. To understand what is being said, we need to be aware of the general Greek belief that, in human generation, the mother contributed no 'matter' to the early embryo (the existence of the human 'egg' was unknown), but only 'form'; she provided a womb in which the sperm grew into the foetus and the foetus into the body. Hence the child was formed entirely out of the matter of the father. The universe is not formed from the 'stuff' of God the Father, nor is Israel; but God the Son is, claims the Nicene Creed, because he is the same sort of thing as the Father—and it makes

²⁶ John 8: 12. See too crucially the claims made about light in the Easter Vigil liturgy of the Catholic church.

this claim by saying that he is 'begotten, not made'.²⁷ Contemporary beliefs, theological and scientific, jointly force the new senses on 'Son', 'beget' and 'make'.

The Fathers of the first few Christian centuries, echoing biblical passages,²⁸ were well aware of the inadequacy of our understanding of God, and so of the inadequacy of human language to express truths about him. But they had no general, well-articulated doctrine of how human language works and the respects in which it is inadequate. There developed, however, from the sixth century onward a movement which coloured much Christian theology for the next five centuries, the *via negativa*. This, very loosely, claimed that all that could be said about God was what he is *not*, and what were the effects of his actions in the world. We could know nothing about what God is like in himself; so all credal claims and prayers are to be read with this restriction. A claim that God is powerful was to be read as a claim that he is not weak; a claim that God is good was to be read as a claim that he is not bad, and so on.

The thinker who began this way of thought in Christian theology (probably deriving it from the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus) was Pseudo-Dionysius, the unknown writer who wrote under the name of Dionysius, St Paul's Athenian convert, and whose writings were generally believed for the next few centuries to be those of Dionysius. Although he allowed a place for the positive way—that is, some positive content to God being 'good', 'wise', and so on—he thought it slender in comparison with the negative content.²⁹ Dionysius's way of thought inspired the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena, the lone significant Western philosopher between the sixth-century

²⁷ Just these kinds of point about the value and limits of talk of 'Father' and 'Son' and 'begetting' are made by, among other authors, St Hilary of Poitiers. He writes that comparisons 'drawn from human experience are not of perfect application to the mysteries of divine power. When One is born from One, God born from God, the circumstances of human birth enable us to apprehend the fact; but a birth which presupposes intercourse and conception and time and travail can give us no clue to the divine method.' And the existence of the Son 'did not take its beginning out of nothing, but went forth from the Eternal... The proceeding forth of God from God is a thing entirely different from the coming into existence of a new substance' (*De Trinitate*, 6. 9 and 6. 35, trans. E. W. Watson, L. Pullen, *et al.*, in St Hilary of Poitiers, *Select Works* (James Parker and Co., 1899)).

²⁸ e.g. 1 Cor. 13: 12.

²⁹ 'αἱ μὲν ἀποφάσεις ἐπὶ τῶν θείων ἀληθεῖς, αἱ δὲ καταφάσεις ἀνάρμοστοι', 'Negative statements about divine matters are true, while positive statements are incongruous' (Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 2. 3).

Boethius and the eleventh-century Anselm; and to some lesser extent also the theologians of the Eastern Church St Maximus the Confessor³⁰ and St John of Damascus.³¹ This powerful current left Christianity with a deep awareness of the inadequacy of human language to express the divine, even when the thirteenth-century philosophers of the West, and especially St Thomas Aquinas, reasserted the availability in human language of significant knowledge of the divine, obtained through natural reason and revelation. And surely those who say that God is wise and powerful are not saying merely that he is not foolish or weak; stones are not foolish or weak, but more is being said about God than that he is like a stone in these respects. And generalizing this point means that we should understand theological definitions as having positive content. I have given an account of how that positive content can be understood, which allows us to begin to understand what the councils which formulated definitions meant by the words which they used. While disagreeing with Aquinas's detailed account of analogy, my sympathies are with his overall approach—that sentences of human language can tell us quite a bit about God, but that they are very inadequate tools for the job.

In this chapter I have discussed how to understand the interpretations of Christian doctrine concerned with metaphysical and historical matters, produced by Councils (or Popes) as official definitions. It remains the case that, however properly derived, if a doctrine is highly improbable on the basis of evidence (scientific and historical evidence and a priori considerations) other than the evidence of proper derivation, then overall it may be improbable; and if that doctrine is a central Christian doctrine, that will count against there having been a Christian Revelation. But it is just because many typical theological definitions do

³⁰ Thus Maximus writes that we must think of God as nothing, since he is none of the things that are, and as 'everywhere and nowhere' at the same time (*Scholia on De divinis nominibus* (PG 4. 204)).

³¹ St Gregory Palamas, regarded as the last of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, who inspired much subsequent Orthodox theology, is sometimes cited as holding that we can have no knowledge of the essence of God but only knowledge of God's 'energies'. These latter are roughly what later Western tradition has called the divine properties—his knowledge, power, goodness, and so on. But Gregory is emphatic that some of these energies are essential energies: i.e. are entailed by the divine essence. To deny this, he writes, would amount to 'openly denying the existence of God—for the saints clearly state, in conformity with St Maximus, that no nature can exist or be known unless it possesses an essential energy' (*The Triads*, III. iii. 6, trans. N. Gendle (Paulist Press, 1983)). Hence he clearly holds that we can know about the essence of God at least this, that it is such as to entail some of these energies.

not have enough other evidence to render them probable or improbable overall (or at any rate to be recognized as rendering them probable overall), that we need evidence that they have been properly derived from the original revelation, and defined by the Church. Although I have outlined some a priori reasons for believing that God would become incarnate and provide atonement for our sins, I have not discussed, and shall not discuss, a priori reasons for believing the developed forms of the central Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement, or the doctrine of the Trinity or other important doctrines. These issues lie outside the scope of this book. What I am concerned to do here is to clarify the complicated structure of evidence for (and against) Christian doctrines, when some of that evidence is provided by the fact that the Church teaches that they have been revealed. Doctrines differ in the extent to which they need this support. That Jesus was crucified, suffered, and was buried, although part of the content of the Nicene Creed, needs no support at all from the fact that it is part of that content; there is massive historical evidence for the truth of these claims. At the other extreme is the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, that Jesus was born of a virgin. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke report this only very briefly, and there is no other affirmation of it in the New Testament. So the purely historical evidence is relatively weak; and there is no strong a priori reason for supposing that if God becomes incarnate, he needs to do so without having a human father (even though the absence of a human father does symbolize his origin 'from above'). On the other hand, the Virgin Birth was a prominent item in all Christian creeds (at least until the appearance of some very liberal statements of Christian doctrine in the course of the last hundred years). Without this evidence from its proclamation by the Church from at least the second century, we would surely not have adequate grounds for believing it. Yet it is clearly properly derivable from what the Church (identified as such by the organization criterion and by the doctrine criterion in respect of other doctrines) recognized by the second century as part of 'the deposit of faith', and was so derived; and the fact of that derivation is the crucial evidence which renders this doctrine overall probably true.

10

The Bible

The Church which declared that creeds expressed the essence of revealed theological truth, also, as I explained in Chapter 8, recognized from the end of the second century onwards that Holy Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, was the core of the 'deposit of faith' from which any claims about the content of revealed doctrine must be derived.

The New Testament had a fairly high view of the divinely inspired status of the Old Testament; thus 2 Timothy 3: 16 asserts that 'all Scripture [i.e. the Old Testament] is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness'. Yet the apparent contrast between some of the teaching of Jesus and that of certain parts of the Old Testament produced some hostility in the Church of the first two centuries towards the Old Testament, culminating in the second-century Marcion's denial that the Old Testament was a Christian book at all. The orthodox reassertion of the Old Testament was led by Irenaeus, but he stressed the temporary and metaphorical nature of certain parts of it; and at the beginning of the third century Origen developed a doctrine of biblical interpretation which stressed the metaphorical nature of considerable parts of the Bible. And it was against this background that the Nicene Creed affirmed that the Holy Spirit 'spoke through the prophets'. But just what did this amount to? For the next thousand years everyone agreed that God the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible, and authorized it as his word (although, as we have seen, it was not fully resolved exactly which books belonged to the Bible for several centuries.)

But exactly what did this mean for each of its sentences? Since, as we shall see, the Bible contains moral fables, metaphysical fables, etc., and since, as I shall argue, the Bible itself exemplifies a unique genre, this must be construed as meaning that it or its units are 'true' in something like the ways developed in Chapter 4 of what it is for units of different genres to be true. The most this can mean is that God ensured that every sentence of the Bible forms part of a unit which is true; I shall call

this view 'the strong view' of biblical authorization. But a weaker view, which I shall call 'the moderate view' might be thought to be all that was involved in what the Church of the next thousand years considered all-important; and that while initially the Protestant churches undoubtedly taught that the strong view was all-important, by the time the Catholic church began to give it that status,¹ some more liberal Protestant bodies were no longer committed to it. This moderate view is that while God ensured that the main messages of Scripture were true, he allowed the human authors to some extent to include a few views of their own on minor matters which were false; so only almost all sentences form parts of a unit which is true. I shall develop these two views more fully in due course, and show that it does not make a great difference to how you interpret the Bible which view you adopt. But without any doubt either the moderate view or (more probably) the strong view must count as a central Christian doctrine. For the thousand years which followed the Council of Nicaea, all ecclesial bodies satisfying my twin criteria to any modest degree would surely have treated as heretical anyone who taught that the Bible was largely false. But then, as I shall develop at length, what the Bible being 'true' amounts to depends on how you divide the Bible up into units; and I shall be discussing the right way to do this.

This view which developed in the Church of the very high status of the Bible went with a view that the Bible was unclear and difficult to understand. Many of its sentences were not to be understood with normal or any literal meanings. Scripture was 'tricky'. Biblical passages could not be understood except in the light of the Church's doctrines, its general method of interpretation, and past interpretations of those passages; and this meant that the Old Testament could not be understood except in the light of the New, and that pre-Christian Israel had a very limited understanding of the scriptural message. On the necessity of interpreting Scripture in the light of Church tradition, the Fathers were unanimous. And, as we have seen, Church Councils determined which books formed

¹ The first clear statement of the strong view which I can find in any definition of a Council recognized as Ecumenical by Roman Catholics is the statement of the Second Vatican Council that 'the books of scripture teach firmly, faithfully, and without error such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain' (Tanner, 976). In referring to this statement, I have, however, written that the Catholic church 'began' to give the strong view the status of all-important, because the Second Vatican Council, unlike earlier Councils, issued no anathemas against those who held views contrary to its own.

part of Scripture partly for reasons of connectedness and continuity of doctrine with what they believed to be the original revelation.

There was, however, a two-way process, for, as we have seen, the Church considered that (at least for the most part) doctrine should be derived from Scripture. For this purpose the books of the New Testament were treated as ordinary books written by human authors recording the original revelation by Jesus and his apostles and the revelation recorded in the Old Testament which Jesus authenticated. Then, by the methods described in Chapter 8, in the light of unwritten tradition of which passages were central for interpreting other passages, systematic doctrines were developed. These doctrines forced on some passages meanings different from those which they would have otherwise. And the doctrinal system had the consequence that the New Testament constrained the interpretation of the Old Testament. Only when thus interpreted were biblical books regarded as inspired Scripture, rather than simply as historical evidence. It is because Christian doctrine conditioned the interpretation of Scripture in this way, that I have come in this chapter to consider the nature of the Bible, after considering in the previous chapter the nature of the doctrines which were purportedly based on it.

Bearing in mind the point just made that biblical passages can be, and were, understood in two different ways—as authored by humans (so as evidence about the content of the original revelation) and as ‘deposit of faith’ ultimately authorized by God—let us apply to the smallest units of the Bible, then to whole books of the Bible, and then to the whole Bible the rules for interpretation of texts generated in Part I. We must bear in mind above all how the genre of a work, and who is its author and intended audience, determines how its sentences are to be understood, and in particular how a statement is to be distinguished from its presuppositions, and how literal senses are to be distinguished from metaphorical senses.

THE SMALLEST UNITS OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is a big book, composed of many smaller books, most of them woven together out of yet smaller strands of writings, each with a different social and cultural context and a different literary context (embedded in a different religious work) at each stage of its production and subsequent use. The meaning of any sentence within it will therefore

depend on which larger unit it is thought of as belonging to, and on who is the author of that unit. I shall throughout this section make a crucial assumption that the 'author' of each unit is the human author who would be picked out as such by ordinary historical investigation. I shall then consider later what difference it would make to the meaning of what is said if we drop that assumption and suppose that God is the author, speaking through human authors.

So let us begin by going back to the smallest units, the bits of poetry and story and oracle from various sources from which the books of the Bible were put together, the units which do not contain any smaller units which had any life of their own in speech or writing. It was modern 'form criticism' which drew our attention to these smallest units. The biblical scholar, inspired by this movement, seeks to isolate each smallest unit and ask of it what it meant when it was originally used, orally or, as the case may be, in writing. To answer this, the scholar must locate the original social context and the original cultural context (discover the common beliefs of the society). He must identify the unit as belonging to a genre and show what are the conventions for understanding units of that genre. Discovering social and cultural context is not easy, and some of the conclusions of biblical scholars in this area are somewhat speculative. But their problem is a soluble one and, in so far as they can solve it, they can tell us the meaning of the unit as originally used.

The social context will reveal the reference of the terms. If Psalm 21 was originally used as a hymn in a New Year festival for the enthronement of the king in the first Temple, then we know to whom 'the king' refers—the king currently being enthroned. The cultural context enables us to recognize and interpret any metaphorical use of words. Consider Revelation 1: 8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega", says the Lord God.' Taken literally, God is said to be making a claim to be identical with each of two different Greek letters. The obvious falsity of that claim directs us to find a metaphorical interpretation.² For this we look to beliefs common in the society: that alpha is the first letter of the alphabet, and omega the last. This firstness of alpha and the lastness of omega suggest that what is being said by the human author of this part of the Book of Revelation is (roughly) that God claims to be the first thing, on which other things depend and after which they follow;

² For a full discussion of some of the tests which can be used to detect when words of some biblical passage are being used metaphorically, see G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Duckworth, 1980), ch. 11.

and that the final purpose of things depends on their relation to God, who will determine what ultimately happens to them.

Knowledge of the cultural context will enable us to recognize instances of different literary genres and thus to see to what extent the truth-value of the whole unit is a function of the truth-value of its constituent sentences. Although sometimes it is evident to which literary genre a biblical unit belongs, that is far from always so; for biblical genres are not always ones familiar to modern people. And in consequence, it is often unclear whether the individual sentences of some units have truth-values (or are meant to be fictional), and what are the criteria for their truth.

There are, for example, various books or parts of books of the Old Testament, about which it is totally unclear whether they were intended to be taken as history, or not. One example is the Book of Daniel. Consider the story of Daniel in the lions' den. Daniel allowed himself to be thrown into a lions' den rather than abandon his prayers to the Jewish God; but God sent his angel to ensure that the lions did not hurt Daniel. Is this history, or a moral fable? My view is that, as originally written, this was a moral fable. Many of the psalms are historical poems, such that only their very general message can be assessed for truth-value; the accuracy of the historical details is irrelevant. Psalm 105 is intended as a summary of the early history of Israel and God's care for it. Verse 18 reports of the captured Joseph: 'His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron.' Genesis does not give such precise details of Joseph's imprisonment. But it is obviously irrelevant to the truth of the psalm whether his neck was put in a collar of iron, or of some other metal, or of rope. Yet whether he was imprisoned at all is, I suggest, relevant to the truth. Is Genesis 1 intended to be history? My view is that it is a metaphysical fable, recounting in poetical terms the dependence of all things as God.

Crucial issues of interpretation arise also with parts of the Bible which no one would suppose to have been intended as history. I discussed in Chapter 7 different interpretations of the parables of Jesus, according to whether they are taken as allegories or moral fables or metaphysical fables. Another important kind of unit of which the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, is built is the prophecy; and which modern genre is closest to the genre of biblical prophecy is not at all clear. The crucial issue is, was a 'prophecy' intended to be unconditional (telling us what will happen, whatever people do) or conditional (telling us what will happen unless people do something to stop it)? Twenty-first-century prophecies of economic disaster (e.g. 'the total volume of traffic will

increase by 50 per cent in the next twenty-five years') normally assume an unexpressed conditional clause (e.g. 'unless the Government does something about it'). There is plenty of evidence internal to the Old Testament that biblical prophecies were normally (but not always) so understood. Thus Ezekiel, purportedly speaking on God's behalf, explicitly asserts that 'though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live' and 'though I say to the wicked "you shall surely die"', these prophecies will not apply if the righteous 'commit iniquity' or the wicked 'turn from their sin'.³ So how we are to understand Jeremiah's prophecy to Zedekiah (on behalf of the Lord), 'David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt-offerings, to make grain-offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time,'⁴ depends on whether we assume an unexpressed conditional clause 'so long as Israel behaves well'.

Cultural context is also crucial for distinguishing what is said from the presuppositions in terms of which it is cast. The sentences of the Bible often have false scientific or historical presuppositions. They often, for example, presuppose that the Earth is flat, square, and stationary, covered with a dome across which the sun, moon, and stars travel each day and night. But the cultural context reveals these as common presuppositions of the society, and the social context typically reveals the main message as to communicate not these presuppositions but something else by means of them. The falsity of the presuppositions does not, therefore (by the argument of Chapter 2), affect the truth-value of a sentence which uses them. Psalm 104 praises God for many marvels of nature, including that he 'set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken'. Now the earth has no 'foundations' in some other body, as the Psalmist supposed. But what he was getting at was that the Earth is not wobbly, it is firm, you can build on it; and he expressed the claim that God is responsible for this, using the presuppositions of his culture. If God is indeed responsible for this stability, the sentence is true. Genesis 8: 2 tells us that at the end of the Flood 'the windows of the heavens [that is, the sky] were closed'. The sky has no windows out of which the rain comes, but the quoted sentence is just the author's way of saying, within the presuppositions of

³ Ezek. 33: 13–16. The story of Jonah preaching to Nineveh (Jonah, chs. 3 and 4) is an illustration of God not carrying out a prophecy of doom when the wicked repented.

⁴ Jer. 33: 17–18.

his culture, that the rain ceased. If it did, then the sentence is true. More generally, the cultural context of the cosmological beliefs common in the Middle East in the second millennium BC, as shown by the similar creation stories in circulation there, helps us to recognize as the messages of the opening chapters of Genesis those aspects of them which diverge significantly from those common presuppositions. Thus other creation stories always pictured the act of divine making of the Earth as shaping a pre-existent matter; Genesis 1: 1 seems to affirm that there was no matter before God acted.⁵

INDIVIDUAL BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

So much for the criteria of truth of the smallest units of the Bible as originally uttered or written. But often compilers put the units together into larger units with the addition of connecting verses and sometimes whole new sections until we have whole strands, such as the separate J, E, D, and P strands which scholars have identified in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), which have an internal continuity and unity. These strands were put together and then cut up into the individual books of the Old and New Testaments as we know them (although there are clearly some books which were written solely by one author). I assume, as in the last section, that the author or compiler is the human author or compiler.

We saw in Chapter 4 how units change their meaning when inserted into larger wholes. This is because the insertion into a larger whole gives the sentences of the unit a different literary context, a different social context (the author is now the author of the larger whole, and the work is addressed to a different audience), and a different cultural context (the culture is now that of the new author and his audience). Although there can be few examples in modern literature of a whole formed by sewing together units of some antiquity written by different authors and groups, the examples of Chapter 4 illustrate what happens to the meaning of units under these circumstances.

We noted there first the process of quotation. In the Bible the prophetic books contain 'oracles'—namely, separate speeches—which

⁵ 'It is correct to say that the verb "bara", "create", contains the idea both of complete effortlessness and *creatio ex nihilo*, since it is never connected with any statement of the material' (G. Von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J. H. Marks, 3rd rev. edn., (SCM Press, 1971), 49).

in the edited book are said to have been spoken by (e.g.) Jeremiah at a certain place.⁶ In the case of the Bible, however, the process of quotation seldom makes any difference to what is asserted, since almost the only speakers for whom a full oracle which existed previously as a separate unit is quoted are those supposed to be inspired to speak the truth, and so ones whose speeches are endorsed by the compiler. There are, however, crucial biblical examples where the addition of a preface or appendix changes the whole tone of the book. The whole tone of the Book of Ecclesiastes is changed by the addition of certain verses, especially at the end (12: 13–14), which purport to summarize its message but really give it a radically new look. A sceptical book becomes a God-centred book. As with Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus* when the Osiander preface is added, the additional verses change the meaning of the rest of the book. Another very similar example is 2 Esdras. 2 Esdras 3–14 seems to be a Jewish non-Christian work; but chapters 1–2 and 15–16 are Christian writings. Adding chapters 1–2 and 15–16 to chapters 3–14 changes the tone of the latter. Its pessimistic outlook about the fate of humanity is transformed by the good news of Christ and the Church, which provides encouragement to Christians to resist bravely in time of persecution.

Footnotes are not a device known to ancient writers. Their substitute for a correcting or amplifying footnote is a verse correcting the previous verse, or a connecting verse saying that the next paragraph fills out the previous one. Daniel 12: 12 seems to be a verse correcting the previous verse with respect to the number of days until the 'end'. An interesting example of a connecting verse is Genesis 2: 4a. This has the function, according to B. S. Childs,⁷ of explaining that the narrative of Genesis 2, which in various ways contradicts that of Genesis 1 (one example is that plants seem to be created before man in Genesis 1, but after man in Genesis 2—see Gen. 2: 5, 7, and 9), is to be read as a detailed filling out of Genesis 1 in some respects.

Just as the genre of the individual unit is sometimes hard for the modern reader to recognize, so sometimes is the genre of the biblical book. In my view 2 Samuel and 1 Maccabees are intended as history or perhaps historical fables (see p. 69), while Jonah and Judith are moral

⁶ e.g. Jer. 26: 7.

⁷ See B. S. Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 2nd edn. (SCM Press, 1983), 150. See also J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), 50–1.

fables. Judith encourages steadfastness under provocation; I will come to Jonah shortly. So, as with parables, their truth does not depend on any correspondence with historical facts. St Paul's 'Letters' are quite obviously letters to churches written by someone who considered himself to have authority over them. But these are easy cases, and the conventions of some other books of the Old and New Testaments are much more difficult to detect. The Book of Job is obviously concerned with the problem of evil, but is it a treatise which seeks to provide a theodicy, or a work which seeks to stimulate the philosophical imagination, or a work which records the story and perplexity of a particular individual? In the first and third cases its truth-value is a function of the truth-value of (some of) the constituent sentences, in the second case not. Apocalyptic—Daniel and Revelation—raises in an acute form the problem of just how literally biblical writing was intended to be taken. My own view, for what it is worth, is that dates were intended to be taken literally, but talk of beasts and lightning is metaphor. But unfortunately, the exact conventions for reading apocalyptic are very unclear to the modern scholar.

A crucial issue in understanding many biblical books concerns the statements of purported authorship contained in their titles. The 'Screw-tape Letters' were not written by Screwtape, although in a sense they purport to be. Our assessment of any truth-value which they contain will have no tendency to rule them out as containing falsity when it is discovered that they were written by C. S. Lewis. This is because they are what I shall call 'manifest pseudepigraphs'—that is, works which in the cultural context of their production would not have been thought by their readers to have been written by their alleged 'author', and their real author would not have thought that readers would think that they had been. The works belong to a genre in which attribution of authorship is openly fictional, so has no truth-value. Are any biblical books manifest pseudepigraphs? I do not know, but 2 Esdras and Tobit are to my mind candidates for being manifest pseudepigraphs. There is, however, clearly another convention at work in the attribution of authorship in many biblical books. If some of a work is literally written or dictated by an original author, then other material written by disciples applying his teaching to new situations may be tacked on to the original material and attributed to the original author. Such attributions would be regarded as true if the teaching was in the spirit of, and inspired by, the original author. Hence oracles not pronounced by the original Isaiah were tacked on to his oracles. More generally, there grew up an Israelite

tradition that as the Law began with Moses, who first transmitted the Ten Commandments from God to Israel in the wilderness, and psalm writing began with David, and 'wisdom' writing began with Solomon, all law was to be attributed to Moses, all psalms to David, and all wisdom literature to Solomon. At an early stage, what was going on was clearly understood: 1 Samuel 30: 25 reports the promulgation by David (*not* Moses) of a new law.⁸ But the conventions were thoroughly misunderstood by many in later centuries, who came to suppose that Moses, as the 'author' of Deuteronomy, the 'fifth book of Moses', wrote in the last chapter thereof the description of his own burial. Books or parts thereof attributed correctly in accordance with these conventions to an original inspiring author, although not literally written or dictated by him, I will 'call traditional pseudepigraphs'.

What is unclear is just what are the limits of traditional pseudepigraphy at different Old and New Testament times. Does the new writing in some sense have to be tacked on to a writing of the original author in order to be ascribed to him? Or do there have to be writings of an original author at all? Is it enough that some original teacher provided the inspiration? One piece of evidence which we have from the first decade of the third century AD is Tertullian's comment, in discussing the authorship of the four Gospels, that 'it may well seem that the works which disciples publish belong to their masters'.⁹ There is no reason to suppose that conventions were different in the first century. For example, even if St Matthew did not write a word of St Matthew's Gospel, it can still be truly attributed to him, so long as it was indirectly inspired by him. What is unclear is whether the incorporation of historical details which make it look as if the work was not merely inspired by, but actually written or dictated by, the original teacher, constitutes making a false statement. The alternative is that such material does not have a truth-value any more than do any personal details about Screwtape contained in his 'letters', because what the disciple is doing is writing not merely in the tradition of the original teacher but in his style, and so writing what he might plausibly have written if he had been alive at the later time. In that case, so long as the historical details are what the original teacher might plausibly have written and the rest of

⁸ See Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 205–6. Likewise within the Book of Proverbs (part of the wisdom literature) whose opening verse describes them as proverbs of Solomon, are to be found subheadings indicating that proverbs from other sources have been tacked on—e.g. Prov. 30: 1 and 31: 1.

⁹ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4. 5.

the work is true, then the whole work is true. I do not know the answer to this question—that is, what were the first-century conventions for the truth-value of writing of this kind; and I do not think that most experts know this. If the conventions were such that incorporation of false historical material of this type would have made the whole work false, then St Paul's Second Letter to Timothy and his Letter to Titus *may* contain false material. These letters were probably not written by St Paul in a literal sense or dictated by him; yet, unlike the First Letter to Timothy or the Letter to the Ephesians, they contain personal material which implies that St Paul was their author. This personal material may, however, consist of fragments of some other letter written by St Paul. In saying that the letters contain falsity, I mean that they do so as letters on their own, but not necessarily as parts of a whole Bible; I shall come to that issue in due course. And I do not imply that the author was seeking to deceive; he *may* have understood the conventions of traditional pseudepigraphy more widely than did his culture. But it is the public conventions which determine how a public document is to be understood. And my main point is the fairly clear one that the work of disciples in biblical times could without falsity be attributed to the original teacher—so long as it was inspired by him and accorded with his teaching.¹⁰

Because the Book of Jonah is, it seems to me, an easy case, it is worth spelling out exactly what it did mean as originally written and circulated on its own, for the reason that many later readers seem to have mistaken its genre as that of a simple historical narrative. It was probably written and circulated in the fifth or fourth century BC, soon after some of the Jews exiled to Babylon had returned to Palestine and the state of Judah had been reconstituted. The book is anonymous; no author is stated. Its story concerns Jonah, an Israelite prophet of the pre-exilic age (referred to in 2 Kgs. 14: 25) whom God told to go to preach to Nineveh, a very large city, capital of the then superpower Assyria; but who, on receiving this command, fled instead in the opposite direction, taking a boat to Tarshish. A storm at sea led to Jonah being thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale; which, after Jonah in misery called on God,

¹⁰ E. Schillebeeckx (*Ministry*, trans. J. Bowden (SCM Press, 1981), 12) claims that this was the way in which the leaders of a church, after the death of its apostolic founder, emphasized the continuity of their teaching with his—by publishing it in gospels and epistles attributed to him. The most recent full-length treatment of the whole issue of pseudepigraphy in the Bible is David G. Meade, *Pseudepigraphy and Canon* (Eerdmans, 1987).

vomited him up on to dry land. The call to preach to Nineveh came again, however, and this time Jonah responded to it. He preached that Nineveh would be destroyed because of its sins. ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’¹¹ But all Nineveh repented, and God did not destroy it. But Jonah was very bitter that his prophecy had not been fulfilled, and he sulked. God then reminded him of the goodness of pity—Jonah became sorry on behalf of a gourd which had provided shadow for him but was destroyed by an east wind—and so God said to him, ‘Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’¹²

Now the ancient world was hardly unfamiliar with fictional stories; nor, in particular, was Israel unfamiliar with moral fables. In Chapter 4 I noted Isaiah 5: 1–7. The story of Jonah has apparently legendary elements, it picks up on no known traditions, and contains several very clear moral messages the content of which is obvious to any reader with a minimum knowledge of the context in which it was written. In its original context it must have been a religious moral fable. At least these moral messages are very clearly there: do not try to run away from your vocation; Israel has a vocation from God to preach to the Gentile world; and the proper response to repentance by others is joy, not sulking that they have not been made to suffer. And there is this further message about the way God interacts with humans: God may tell prophets to prophesy destruction of wrongdoers, but God is only too willing to rescind a threat of destruction if the wrongdoers repent.

I have written that the Book of Jonah is a religious moral fable, and that this is an easy case for assignment of genre. I have a suspicion, however, that one reason why it is difficult to assign many other Old Testament books to modern genres, such as the genre of moral fable parable, is that biblical writers and their immediate readers did not always make the kind of sharp literal/metaphorical distinctions which we try to make today. Did the Yahwist (the compiler of the J strand of the first five books of the Old Testament) think of himself as claiming in Genesis 11: 1–9 (the story of the Tower of Babel), that various people who in a literal sense spoke the same language came together and built a tower ‘with its top in the heavens’, and so on? I am inclined to think that the Yahwist made no sharp distinction between historical and metaphorical accounts of the human condition. He thought that the divisions among

¹¹ Jonah 3: 4.

¹² Jonah 4: 11.

humans, symbolized by the divisions of language, were caused by humans exalting themselves above their status (possibly symbolized by towers which the Babylonians built), and so he incorporated in his book an account of roughly how this came about. But, I suspect, he never asked himself the question of just how rough 'roughly' was. Did humans once have literally the same language or similar languages, or was it merely that they got on with each other without quarrelling? Was their pride manifested literally in tower building, or was his talk of towers just the author's way of representing pomp and big buildings? The compiler and his audience did not, I suspect, even ask these questions, or at any rate attempt to answer them. My reason for this suspicion is that while the compiler sets his various sections, including this one, in somewhat of a historical sequence (suggesting a concern with literal history), he makes no attempt to make the separate stories fit together. Genesis 11: 2 assumes that the human race is living together in one place, whereas the previous chapter (some of which belongs to the J strand) had given an account of how the descendants of Noah had given rise to various different races living in different places.¹³ This treatment suggests that the compiler simply regarded the different bits as describing in a rough and picturesque way different aspects of history. Now this view of mine about the J strand may be quite mistaken. Fortunately, not a great deal turns on this, for how Genesis 11 is to be understood in the context of a Christian Bible will be seen to depend on very different considerations from those determining its original genre.

THE WHOLE BIBLE

So much for the truth-conditions of individual books of the Bible, considered on their own. In analysing these, I made a crucial assumption that the authors of these books were the ordinary human individuals or groups who wrote or compiled the books. But what the Church proclaimed as Holy Scripture were—it claimed—books inspired and ultimately authorized by God.¹⁴ The Church put the Bible together, but did so by selecting books (in the way outlined in Chapter 8) deriving

¹³ On all this, see Von Rad, *Genesis*, 147–55.

¹⁴ The First Vatican Council affirmed that the Church recognized books as Scripture in virtue of their prior inspiration; the inspiration existed prior to its recognition (Tanner, 806).

from prophets or apostles in which were recorded what in its view was God's revelation through them to man. No one wished to deny that these books were written by human authors, as was evident by the fact that so often there are references to 'I' who did certain things, which can only be construed as a reference to such an author (e.g. St Paul); and by the discrepancies of style of the different books. But the Church claimed that these books were divinely inspired, and divinely authorized—that is, God was the ultimate author who authorized these books to be published as his revelation.

Ultimate authorship may take either of two forms. First, the ultimate author A may simply tell another person B what to say or write, either the exact words or the general message. B may then act as an oral messenger, beginning his message with 'A has told me to say'; or B, having written down a text, may preface it with these words, or A may sign the text. But, secondly, ultimate authorship may be less direct. A may authorize B to write letters or take messages on his behalf on a range of issues about which he provides B with general guidance. B then delivers messages or writes letters. In these he may state explicitly that he is doing this as A's representative; or it may be well known that he is A's representative, and he does not need to say this. When a typist takes a letter from dictation which the boss then signs, the boss is the ultimate author in the first sense. But when an ambassador makes a protest which he knows (without prior instruction) that his government will wish him to make, the government is the ultimate author in the second sense. Both kinds of ultimate authorship involve inspiration (in the sense that at some stage A had to let B know what his view is). But inspiration can lead to the production of a message without the inspirer being the ultimate author. An older philosopher may inspire a younger philosopher who writes a book expressing views similar to those of the older philosopher, without the older philosopher being in any way the author of the book—if the younger philosopher did not write the book on behalf of the older one.¹⁵

Now clearly the Church was claiming that God was not merely the inspirer but the ultimate author of the biblical books. But only in some of those books does the human writer claim explicitly to be reporting

¹⁵ This paragraph and the two subsequent paragraphs about the nature of inspiration and authorization largely summarize points made very fully and defended against rival accounts of biblical inspiration by Nicholas Wolterstorff in his very important book *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

a message from God. The Old Testament prophets often proclaim a message, beginning 'Thus says the Lord'.¹⁶ Most biblical books do not report an explicit commission from God to write them. Yet, what the Church which recognized them as Scripture was saying about them was that they were in fact written on God's behalf, so that he was the ultimate author in the second sense. Note the contrast between Scripture, which the Church claimed to be ultimately God's word, and doctrinal definitions analysed in the previous chapter, in which Councils purport to interpret God's word.

Secretaries who try to put the boss's view into words or ambassadors who try to represent their government's view may not fully understand it; or, even if they do, may try to put on it a slant of their own. And in such a case, if the divergence from the view of the ultimate author is a small one, he will accept responsibility for what is said. A government may authorize an ambassador's representations in advance, and so take responsibility for the consequences of minor errors, which it would expect the recipient to recognize if they proved dissonant with the main message. (One does not send a new letter to someone just because the typist has typed a wrong name or place, when not much turns on this and one could expect the recipient to recognize the error.) A government would only disown a representation if the divergence was substantial. There are different views of the nature of divine authorization, according to the extent to which you think that the human author was open to the divine view. But in order to explore the consequences of a simple position, I shall work—to begin with—with what I called earlier the strong view of divine authorization. I shall assume that, while God allowed the Bible's messages to be expressed in the styles of its various human authors and compilers, he ensured that each of the Bible's sentences belonged to a unit which was true. In the case of any sentences which belong to units whose truth-value depends on the truth of each of its sentences (e.g. straightforward historical narrative), that means that each of its sentences is true. (For every genre, including historical narrative, there is a standard of accuracy determining what counts as true—see pp. 36–7.) I shall not make any assumption about the way in which that inspiration was exercised—whether by midnight vision to authors, a feeling of guidance to compilers, or an indirect and almost unfelt influence in the community which formed the views of

¹⁶ e.g. Amos 1: 3.

authors and compilers.¹⁷ (Fathers, scholastics, and Reformers tended to assume that each biblical book had only one human author, and that the method of inspiration was a fairly direct one.)

After exploring this strong view, I shall then comment on the consequences of modifying this view to what I have called the moderate view according to which God inspired the human authors, but they did not fully understand his message or to some small degree imposed their own views on what they wrote; he nevertheless authorized in advance what they would write, knowing that they would conform very largely to his wishes. He thus ensured that most of the Bible's sentences belonged to units which were true. We shall see that permitting a small amount of error by the human authors will not make much difference to the way in which the message of the Bible is to be interpreted; only allowing the possibility of a considerable amount of error would make any substantial difference.¹⁸

Christians did not regard the biblical books merely as all ultimately authorized by God, but as having a common intended audience. They were directed not merely at those who first read them, but at the whole world. And since each book was to be interpreted in the light of God's other beliefs and some of these were to be found in other biblical books (since God did not have different beliefs when he authorized different books), the biblical books could now be regarded as forming a single book, the Bible, having a different context from the contexts of the individual books written solely by human authors, and so as having a different meaning from what they would have had otherwise. For the meaning of some sentence depends on its literary context (the book to which it belongs—now a much larger one), its social context (its author—God; and its audience, the one which he intended it to have), and its cultural context (the presuppositions and genres shared between God and his intended audience). But while in the Church's view the intended audience was the whole world, the whole world is too large a group to have a substantial common culture which would enable it to

¹⁷ For various writers, Catholic and Protestant, who have recently championed a 'social theory' of inspiration—i.e. inspiration of the community in which a work was generated and compiled—see Meade, *Pseudepigraphy and Canon*, 209 nn. 21 and 22.

¹⁸ On different modern Protestant ways of understanding the 'inspiration' of the Bible, and defence of a preferred such way (a moderately weak one), see W. J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford University Press, 1981). For the understanding of 'inspiration' in the Fathers, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edn. (A. & C. Black, 1977), 60–4.

understand the Bible's allusions and see the point of its stories. There must be a narrower group to whom the Bible was directed who would best be able to interpret it. The Church held, unanimously as we shall see, that that narrower intended audience was the Church, and it was only with this assumption that it recognized the Bible's authority. But not, presumably, the Church of the fourth century AD alone, which began to give the Bible its final form, but the Church of earlier centuries as well, which used most of its books, and the old Israel, which used some of its books. And the process of refining biblical texts and of inquiring whether the books of the Apocrypha belong to the Bible never having stopped, there is point in saying that the process of canonization has never quite stopped. Further, in some ways which I shall examine shortly, the fourth-century Church held and, as we shall see, had to hold that the Church of later centuries would sometimes be better able to interpret its message than it could itself. So the answer which I suggest is that, if God is the Bible's author, the Bible's audience was the Church of many centuries, including our own and yet future centuries.

I therefore proceed to investigate the question of the tests for what the Bible does mean if God is its ultimate author in the strong sense and the Church of many centuries is its intended audience. This social and cultural context, together with the literary context of each book being part of the whole Bible, provides a framework making possible disambiguation of what, as it stands, is a very ambiguous text. As it stands, it is a collection of separate books, each having its own unity. There are no virtually connecting verses between the separate books, nor any preface which explains the relation of one book to another. There are many obvious inner conflicts—for example, between Israelite leaders (apparently on God's behalf) commending the extermination of the Canaanites, men, women, and children, and burning their cities by fire, as described in the Book of Judges; and Jesus (apparently on God's behalf) commending non-violence in the Gospels. Is the Old Testament with its ritual law and (in parts) violent treatment of enemies of equal authority with the New? Or is the Old Testament simply the record of humans seeing some partial truth, more fully revealed in the New? Or, alternatively, is the New the record of humans losing a vision grasped by the Old Testament?

The slogan of Protestant confessions, 'the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself',¹⁹ is quite hopeless. The

¹⁹ The Westminster Confession, 1. 9; in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, ii. 608.

Bible does not belong to an obvious genre which provides rules for how overall meaning is a function of meaning of individual books. We must have a preface. And if not a preface in the same volume, a short guide by the same author issued in the same way as the Bible, providing disambiguation and publicly seen by the intended audience to do so. Such a guide would be an extension of the original work. And that said, there is of course such a guide, as I have commented from time to time in the previous two chapters. The guide is the Church's theological definitions and other central teaching, its tradition of the proper way to interpret the Bible, and its tradition of how particular passages should be interpreted. It was the Church which was founded by Christ which alone was authorized to interpret the original revelation; and it was the Church which declared which books constituted Scripture in the light of a certain understanding of how those books should be interpreted. Without that understanding of the source of the Bible's authority, there are neither grounds for believing it to be authorized by God nor rules for interpreting it.

It was on that basis that Irenaeus commended and got the Bible accepted as a Christian document. 'Every word' of Scripture 'shall seem consistent' to someone, wrote Irenaeus, 'if he for his part diligently read the Scriptures, in company with those who are presbyters in the Church, among whom is the apostolic doctrine'.²⁰ A few years later Tertullian commented that disputes between orthodox and heretics could not be settled by appeal to Scripture, since its limits and meaning are uncertain. Scripture belongs to the Church. The Church's teaching must first be identified, and that will determine how Scripture is to be interpreted. 'Wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith shall be, there will likewise be the true Scripture and expositions thereof.'²¹

And the famous rule of Vincent of Lerins, quoted in Chapter 8, that the faith was what was believed 'always, everywhere and by everyone', was given by him in answer to the question as to how Scripture should be interpreted. So diverse were the interpretations of Scripture that his rule was meant as a guide as to which interpretation should be adopted. Scripture consists of what is approved as such by the universal Church, he wrote elsewhere, and it should be interpreted in accordance with 'Catholic dogma'.²² Both Orthodox and Catholics responded in the

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4. 32. 1.

²¹ Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, 19.

²² Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 27.

same way to Protestant declarations about the authority of Scripture. The Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah II responded to the Augsburg Confession that 'all those things which we have spoken are founded ... upon the inspired Scriptures, according to the interpretation and sound teaching and explanation of our wise and holy theologians. For we may not rely upon our own interpretation. ... [We must] understand ... in accord with the theologizing Fathers who have been approved by the Holy Councils, inspired by the Holy Spirit.'²³ And the Council of Trent spoke of the Church, 'to whom it belongs to judge of the Holy Scriptures'.²⁴ The idea that the Bible could be interpreted naked, without a tradition of interpretation which clarified its meaning, is not intrinsically plausible and would have appealed to hardly anyone before the fifteenth century. Theology from without always dictated which sentences of the Bible were benchmarks by which other sentences were to be interpreted.²⁵

A crucial consequence of this rule was, in view of what Christian teaching said about the superiority of the manifestation of God in Christ to all that had gone before, that in any apparent clash between Old and New Testaments, the New took priority. Passages in the Old Testament in apparent conflict with the New were either to be interpreted as God's temporary and limited revelation superseded by the fuller revelation, or to be interpreted metaphorically. The first approach and the first step towards the second approach are both to be found in Irenaeus, inspired by the way in which the New Testament itself interpreted the Old Testament.

Thus the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, contains many detailed laws about justice and sacrifice, said to have been laid down by God himself. The New Testament taught that the whole Old Testament law of sacrifice and ritual was no longer binding on anyone; and the Christian Church taught that the New Testament contained God's fuller, simpler, and deeper laws of moral behaviour. And it assumed that the Old Testament laws concerned with the state's judicial system were now abrogated, even when, from the fourth century onward, the Roman Empire and other states became Christian. So how were all these Old Testament laws to be taken now? Why include them at all in the Bible? Christian apologetic of the early centuries gave one or other of two answers, both of which are to be found in Irenaeus.

²³ Pelikan and Hotchkiss, i. 273. ²⁴ Tanner, 664.

²⁵ This is one of the themes of James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Clarendon Press, 1983); see e.g. pp. 39–41.

The first approach represents the Old Testament Law as a minimum standard of behaviour, consisting in detailed rules and backed up by precise punishments and rewards, useful for educating simple human beings, lacking in much natural love for God and their fellows, and issued by God for a chosen group of such humans.²⁶ The approach takes its beginning from the words of Christ about divorce; Christ forbade divorce, and in response to a question as to why Moses had allowed it, stated that this was because of man's hardness of heart.²⁷ And the apostolic church went on to teach that the whole Old Testament law of sacrifice and ritual was no longer binding on anyone;²⁸ and that God had provided fuller, simpler, and deeper laws of moral behaviour (which the subsequent Church regarded as contained in the New Testament). The ritual and other provisions of the Pentateuch, which might well have been regarded as imperatives before, were now seen as firmly enclosed within quotation marks, reporting an original promulgation which Christian doctrine (contained in the New Testament) showed to be no longer binding.

The other and more prominent approach in Irenaeus is that the Old Testament has metaphorical and, in particular, typological significance; 'the earthly things' of 'gifts, oblations, and all the sacrifices' are 'types of the celestial'.²⁹ That the sacrificial regulations contained in the Pentateuch symbolize deeper realities derives its most obvious Christian inspiration from the Letter to the Hebrews. The tent and 'all the vessels used in worship'³⁰ were commanded by Moses to be sprinkled with blood on occasions of solemn sacrifice. But since 'it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins',³¹ a voluntary sacrifice of a pure agent is needed. The ritual provisions tell us of the need for sacrifice, and they represent typologically the kind of sacrifice which would be efficacious; and they constitute types of the sacrifice actually offered (according to the Letter to the Hebrews) by Christ. Blood represents life, and the 'tent' and vessels represent sacred things, perhaps human beings. 'It

²⁶ Irenaeus calls the Old Testament laws 'the laws of bondage', which were cancelled by 'the new covenant of liberty'. See his *Adversus haereses*, 4. 16. 5.

²⁷ Matt. 19: 8; Mark 10: 5.

²⁸ Acts 15: 20 has the consequence that the law of sacrifice and ritual is no longer binding on the Gentiles. That it is also no longer binding on Jews is entailed by Paul's rebuke to Peter recorded in Gal. 2: 11–17. That not merely circumcision (alone explicitly referred to in those two passages), but the whole Judaic Law, is no longer binding is developed as positive doctrine in Gal. 3: 10–13.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4. 19. 1.

³⁰ Heb. 9: 21.

³¹ Heb. 10: 4.

was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites' by 'the blood of calves and goats', but 'the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these':³² namely, the life of the perfect human Jesus Christ. So, to take a particular example, the sacrificial regulations provided that the main part of a bullock offered as an offering for sin should be disposed of by being burnt 'outside the camp', presumably so as not to pollute the community whose camp it was.³³ So, comments the Letter to the Hebrews, 'Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.'³⁴ There is a genuine similarity here. Jesus, I urged in Chapter 7, claimed to be providing an atonement, a truly efficacious offering for sin symbolized by the ineffacious offerings of animals. The culmination of his atoning life was his atoning death; his crucifixion, therefore, like the animal sin offering, was getting rid of an impurity, and so it was undesirable (from the Jewish viewpoint) that it should take place within the city.

Irenaeus also interpreted Old Testament narratives typologically. As well as giving it a historical interpretation, Irenaeus gave a typological interpretation to the Genesis story of the two daughters of Lot getting their father drunk, and then having sexual intercourse with him, resulting in the birth of two sons. For Irenaeus, Lot is the type of 'the Word of God' who poured out his life-giving seed while 'eating with men, and drinking wine upon the earth'. He joined his seed to his own two churches, the Old Israel and the Christian Church, 'which produced living sons to the living God'.³⁵ Unlike Irenaeus's typological interpretation of the Law, this is a far-fetched typological interpretation, in the sense that there is very little similarity here between the type and that of which purportedly it was the type. But I cite it to illustrate a method of interpreting the Old Testament which Irenaeus thought correct and which others before and after him developed with better examples—for instance, taking the stories, believed historical, about Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet as types of aspects of the life of Jesus. For this way of interpreting the Old Testament the Fathers could again claim the authority of the New Testament. See, for example, St Paul's interpretation of the Genesis story of Isaac and Ishmael. On the assumption that Paul understood this narrative as historical, the sustained metaphorical interpretation is, like that of

³² Heb. 9: 23.

³³ Exod. 29: 14; Lev. 4: 12, 21; Num. 19: 3.

³⁴ Heb. 13: 12.

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4. 31. 1–3.

Irenaeus, typological, rather than (in my terminology) allegorical. Paul recalls that 'Abraham had two sons, one [Ishmael] by a slave woman [Hagar], and the other [Isaac] by a free woman [Sarah]', and that Scripture tells us, 'Drive out the slave and her child, for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman'. St Paul's interpretation of this is that 'these women are two covenants'. Hagar is the covenant of the Old Testament Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai in Arabia 'and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above [God's new covenant given through Jesus]; she is free, and she is our mother.'³⁶ Abraham's relationship with Hagar was a relation based simply on the desire for sexual satisfaction, and so was 'according to the flesh' and resulted in a slave child. But the relationship with Sarah was the relation with a free wife which was the object of a promise by God that Abraham and Sarah, though both old, would have a child and through that child all nations would be blessed. That keeping the Jewish Law is a servile relationship and that serving God freely without its narrow constraints is the better way was a very deeply embedded part of the Christian message. Paul's interpretation of the passage as part of a Christian Scripture is therefore fairly natural, and less strained than Irenaeus's interpretation of the story of Lot.

These explicit examples of typological interpretation of the Old Testament in the New Testament show, if we suppose the Bible to be authorized by a single authorizer, that the Bible belongs to a genre in which typological interpretation is to be expected. We may properly therefore look for further passages which can be correctly so understood, where the Bible does not itself explicitly provide that interpretation. In general, as with Irenaeus but (as we shall see) not with the Fathers who followed him, the New Testament understood in the way its human authors understood it seems to assume that apparently historical Old Testament stories were historically accurate, and that its commands—as well as having their more important metaphorical meaning—were to be understood as having their literal meaning. But not always. Paul denied that the Old Testament command 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain' had its literal meaning, with the remark 'Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake.'³⁷ And he interprets it as a command to Christian congregations to feed and accommodate their

³⁶ Gal. 4: 22–6.

³⁷ 1 Cor. 9: 9–10.

teachers. Here is a straightforward metaphorical interpretation, which is not typological, but is too brief to constitute an allegory.

Irenaeus's twofold approach to the Old Testament was thus well grounded in the New Testament, and was then carried much further by the Fathers who interpreted Scripture in the course of the next two centuries; and it was with their understanding of Scripture, continued and developed in subsequent centuries, that the biblical books were given canonical status. And it is that understanding which, I am arguing, is the way in which the books should be read if we accept on the Church's authority that they have been authorized by God.

THE REVELATION TO THE OLD ISRAEL

First, then, the Old Testament was regarded as a history of God's progressive revelation to Israel. It follows that, in the absence of contrary reason (provided in particular by Christian doctrine or truths of other kinds to be mentioned below) any passage of the Old Testament should be taken in a natural sense. And what the Fathers seem to understand by this is understanding it as having that meaning which it would have if authored by a human author writing to his contemporaries (although his doing this was authorized by God). I will call this way of understanding a passage 'understanding it straight': what God is saying to all humans always is what the human author was saying then. However, I made the point earlier, a point not recognized by Irenaeus or any other of the Fathers, that according to how we understand the larger whole to which the passage belongs, we get several meanings for the passage which may be very different from each other. But it is consistent with the spirit of Irenaeus, who would surely have recognized the authors or compilers at all stages of the writing of the Bible as inspired, to regard all these meanings as legitimate, so long as they are consistent with Christian doctrine and other kinds of knowledge to be considered below. God was telling Israel different things at different times—a compiler who incorporated a passage in a larger whole was giving Israel a new and sometimes different message from God. But, for the sake of simplicity of exposition, I will generally assume below that there is only one straight meaning; what I write can easily be adjusted to take account of the plurality of straight meanings. Treating a passage straight is not the same as treating it literally. The cultural context of publication of a particular biblical book as a book of a certain genre

may involve understanding many of its sentences as metaphorical. If passages can be treated in at least one straight way, it ought to be done in one such way. So the story of David and Jonathan in 2 Samuel is to be read as the history (or perhaps historical fable) which it purports to be; and its statements have to be judged as true or false by the rough-and-ready standards of historical truth by which such matters would then be judged.³⁸ The Book of Jonah, however, is to be read as a religious moral fable.

But if, when interpreted straight, the passage represents God as commanding a rather low minimal standard of behaviour (e.g. punishing wrongdoers, rather than forgiving them and trying to reform them), or presupposes scientific or historical falsities, we may need to understand it historically as God's message to Israel at a particular time. Treating a passage historically means treating it as enclosed within a statement that God through a human author had commanded or commended certain things (e.g. singing psalms) or informed them of theological facts, expressed within the limited historical and scientific presuppositions of the original recipients. Any instruction will be of a kind which the Israelites could understand and appreciate at their particular stage of spiritual and intellectual development. Understanding a passage straight and understanding it historically are both ways of understanding it as a message from God for ancient Israel. The difference is that when the passage is understood straight, the message has no false presuppositions and is for everyone as well as its immediate recipients. When the passage is read historically, its presuppositions are those of its immediate recipients; There may or may not be a message for everyone else when these presuppositions are removed, apart from the message that the message with its presuppositions was delivered to Israel.

One can only understand notions like mercy, forgiveness, and repentance, if one first understands what is wrong and right and that wrongdoing deserves punishment. For mercy is remitting punishment, and forgiveness is forgiving the repentant wrongdoer. Hence a God who was gradually educating Israel might well teach it first that punishment is deserved and should be required before helping it to see that there is something even better than punishing wrongdoers. If the Israelites are

³⁸ Augustine recognized that minor discrepancies of historical detail between biblical passages do not rule out the historical truth of the main claim of the passages, which is all that is relevant (see *De consensu Evangelistarum*, II. 12. 29 and II. 21. 51, cited in G. Bonner, 'Augustine as Biblical Scholar', in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, i (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 556).

(with God's help) to work this out for themselves, they must progress through the lower stage.

God might also be expected, by the argument of Chapter 5, to cast a theological message within the presuppositions (historical and scientific) of the culture of those whom he was addressing, and his doing so would not render that message false (see pp. 27–32). Thus many Old Testament passages reporting God's attitude to particular actions of humans seem to represent God as embodied or subject to emotion, as 'striking people down' or as 'angry' (in a sense which involved emotion). As I wrote in Chapter 9, Christian doctrine taught that God was not like this. Yet, we can plausibly suppose that God spoke to the people of Israel through prophets and other teachers in terms of their presuppositions (which sometimes, though not generally, included thinking of God as embodied and subject to emotion). This point was common currency among the Fathers. Thus Novatian:

The prophet was speaking about God at that point in symbolic language, fitted to that stage of belief, not as God was but as the people were able to understand ... God, therefore, is not mediocre, but the people's understanding is mediocre; God is not limited, but the intellectual capacity of the people's mind is limited.³⁹

Similarly, the scientific presuppositions, such as those of Psalm 104: 5 or Genesis 8: 2 on which I commented earlier, are the ones in terms of which God would have inspired primitive Israel to think of him. That the message of Genesis was expressed in simple, not fully accurate ways which could be understood by simple people was also common currency among the Fathers and scholastics. Clement of Alexandria who, like Athanasius and Augustine (see below) after him, believed that all the created world had been made by God simultaneously, held that the description in Genesis of creation taking six days was a method of expounding the different kinds of created being adapted to human intelligence.⁴⁰ Aquinas doubted whether there were in a literal sense

³⁹ Novatian, *De Trinitate*, 6. For Origen's use of this 'principle of accommodation', as it has been called, see R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (SCM Press, 1959), 224–31. Aquinas writes with respect to such cases that 'Holy Scripture is intended for us all in common without distinction of persons ... and fitly puts forward spiritual things under bodily likenesses; at all events, the uneducated may then lay hold of them, those, that is to say, who are not ready to take intellectual truths neat with nothing else' (*Summa theologiae*, 1a. 1. 9).

⁴⁰ In *Stromateis*, 6. 15, Clement writes that Scripture uses 'expressions capable of leading to other conceptions'; its meaning is 'veiled', waiting to be discovered by those

'waters that were above the dome' on the scientific grounds that any water in such parts would be compelled by its weight to fall to the Earth. He therefore interprets the text in accordance with the principle that 'Moses was speaking to ignorant people and out of condescension to their simpleness presented to them only those things immediately obvious to the senses'.⁴¹

Although, as I have stressed, there is much uncertainty about the social and cultural context of the Old Testament writings, and so of the straight and historical meanings of many of its passages, nevertheless this general method of treating the Old Testament does yield the following vague picture of God's progressive revelation to Israel. A primitive nomadic people became conscious of a god who had chosen them to be his own people, a god more powerful than the gods of neighbouring peoples, who cared for them often in a miraculous way through many adversities. He was so great a god that to worship anything less was a sin worthy of death. His commands required immediate and total obedience. At first he instructed them in very simple principles of justice (such as that victims have the right to secure the punishment of their oppressors). But gradually he led Israel to have deeper insights about right conduct than they had originally: that it is not always good to punish those who do wrong (to show mercy is often better than that⁴²); that children must not be punished for the wrongdoing of parents, that women had many rights equal to those of men, that people should care for their neighbours and be generous in remitting debts. Finally, he made clear to them that he was not just their god but the only god, the God of all peoples of the Earth, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. He had chosen Israel as his special people to be a vehicle of his revelation to all peoples, who were equally worthy of respect, and for whose welfare they should pray.

Such, I believe, is the core of many of the books of the Old Testament, taken in their historical order and treated either straight or historically. What I write would not, I think, be greatly disputed in its most general

'who seek the truth through love'. In 6: 16 he interprets the days of creation as the order in which God announced the things which he had created in one simultaneous act; 'those things were announced first, from which came those that were second' (trans. W. Wilson, *Clement of Alexandria*, ii (T. & T. Clark, 1869)). For Athanasius, see his *Second Discourse Against the Arians*, 48 and 60.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a. 68. 3, commenting on Gen. 1: 7.

⁴² On punishment as a right, and mercy as a work of supererogation which goes beyond rights, see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. 99.

tone, though of course any more detailed filling out would be subject to much more dispute. The modern world, however, has become very conscious of the fact that some passages of the Old Testament cannot be treated in this way; for they state (and not merely presuppose) scientific and historical falsities, or they represent God as commanding immoral conduct (not merely conduct which might seem less than the best), or otherwise behaving immorally. It has therefore tended to say that the Old Testament contains a mixture of truth and falsity, revelation and misunderstanding; and that attitude of course leads to a fairly low view of the sacredness of Scripture. And if one reads the books of the Old Testament on their own, either straight or historically, one must certainly say that, if God was inspiring the development of Israel and its recording in the Old Testament, his inspiration got mixed with much error. But what the modern world has forgotten is that the Church, which followed Irenaeus and subsequent Fathers in proclaiming the Old Testament to be Scripture, also followed the way which he initiated in interpreting in metaphorical senses any passages of that Testament which were not edifying if taken in straight or historical senses. As noted above, Irenaeus himself tends to assume that all such passages are to be understood in straight or historical ways, even if they had also a more important metaphorical meaning. But his successors took the logical step of maintaining that these passages had only a metaphorical meaning (or more than one metaphorical meaning). This metaphorical meaning is a meaning forced on the passage, not by considerations of the need to make sense of that passage as a passage of the biblical book taken on its own, but by the need to make sense of it as part of a Christian Scripture.⁴³

METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The rules for recognizing metaphor elucidated in Chapter 3 suggest that (unless the genre suggests otherwise) you should take a sentence in a

⁴³ I have already pointed out that some passages of biblical books may need to be taken metaphorically in view of the former considerations. For the rest of this chapter, however, for the sake of brevity of exposition I shall ignore this point, and refer to the metaphorical interpretation forced on the text by taking it as part of a Christian Scripture simply as metaphorical interpretation; and so contrast taking a passage in a straight, historical way on the one hand with taking it metaphorically on the other.

figurative sense if, when taken with one of its literal meanings, it would be obviously false or inappropriate in the context. The genre of the Bible is, as we have seen, hospitable to metaphor, and that is normally the only figurative meaning which makes sense in the context. The metaphorical meaning is determined by the literal sense of its words and by its literary, social, and cultural context. If God is the ultimate author of the Bible and the Church of many centuries its intended audience, then that context will include central Christian doctrines, including those developed in the New Testament. All of these points were made explicitly by Origen early in the third century. He gives his account of the rules for biblical interpretation at some length in *On First Principles*, 4. 3. The chapter begins with a long list of passages of Scripture which, our general knowledge of the world shows us, cannot possibly be taken with literal meanings. (What I call a literal meaning or sense is sometimes called in medieval and patristic writings a literal (*ad litteram*) or proper (*proprius*) meaning, and sometimes a bodily or carnal meaning.) The passages listed by Origen include ones which the human author of the biblical book probably did not intend to be understood as having their literal meaning, but in general they are ones which we must judge that the human author intended to be understood with a literal meaning. They include passages from both the Old Testament (e.g. Genesis) and the New Testament (the Devil taking Jesus up 'into a high mountain' to show him 'the kingdoms of the whole world'). Origen says that we must understand what we can take with a literal meaning, and he emphasizes that he is far from denying that there is much literal truth in the Bible. But he claims that 'the whole of divine scripture' has 'a spiritual meaning, but not all a bodily meaning'.⁴⁴ (What I call a metaphorical meaning is sometimes called in medieval and patristic writings metaphorical (*μεταφορικός*) or figurative (*figuratus*), sometimes 'spiritual' or 'divine'.) The key to scriptural meaning is the New Testament teaching of the Kingdom of God as the new Jerusalem (roughly, Heaven), the Church as the new Israel, and other explicitly recognized New Testament fulfilments of Old Testament types. Then all Old Testament talk about 'Jerusalem', whether or not it can be taken literally about Jerusalem in Palestine, must be held to have a spiritual content concerning the heavenly Jerusalem:

If therefore the prophecies relating to Judaea, to Jerusalem, and to Israel, Judah, and Jacob, suggest to us because we do not interpret them in a fleshly

⁴⁴ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4. 3. 5.

sense, mysteries such as these, it will follow that the prophecies which relate to Egypt and the Egyptians, to Babylon and the Babylonians, to Tyre and the Tyrians, to Sidon and the Sidonians, or to any of the other nations, are not spoken solely of the bodily Egyptians, Babylonians, Tyrians, and Sidonians. If the Israelites are spiritual, it follows that the Egyptians and Babylonians are also spiritual.⁴⁵

And so on. Origen's principles of interpretation had immense influence on all subsequent interpretation of Scripture.⁴⁶ Beryl Smalley has written that 'to write a history of Origenist influence on the West would be tantamount to writing a history of Western exegesis'⁴⁷, and—she could have added—Eastern exegesis as well.

Right at the centre of Christian doctrines which force metaphorical interpretations on the Old Testament are the moral doctrines taught by Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, about what is the right way to treat other humans. Hence such sentiments as the vengeful sentiments of Psalm 137 which says of the Babylon which held Jews in captivity, 'Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock',⁴⁸ cannot—if understood with a literal meaning—be regarded as inspired by the God of the Christians. The apparent sentiments of Psalm 137 are in fact quite contrary not merely to those of the New Testament but also to those of the contemporary letter of Jeremiah to the Jews in Babylon,⁴⁹ telling them to pray for their captors—also part of Scripture. Hence a metaphorical interpretation should be adopted, and was adopted by all the Fathers from the beginning of the third century onwards, who also denied that it could be understood in a literal way. Christian doctrine thought of God as omnipotent and omniscient; hence passages which implied that he was a small-status God ought also to be subjected to a metaphorical understanding. Thus Origen commented with respect to Genesis 2: 8–9: 'Who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, planted a paradise Eastward in Eden?'⁵⁰ Augustine, like others, took the passage both literally and also as having a deeper metaphorical meaning; but he does not dismiss either the interpretation that it had only a literal meaning or the interpretation

⁴⁵ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4. 3. 9.

⁴⁶ Origen was of course condemned as a heretic 300 years after his death by the Second Council of Constantinople (AD 553), but not for anything having any connection with his views about biblical interpretation.

⁴⁷ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Basil Blackwell, 1952), 14.

⁴⁸ Ps. 137: 9. ⁴⁹ Jer. 29: 7.

⁵⁰ Origen, *On First Principles*, 3.1. The Jewish commentator Philo had made a similar comment—*Allegorized Interpretation*, 1. 14.

that it had only a metaphorical meaning.⁵¹ Metaphorical interpretation was the utilization, in a culture expecting to find allegories and types in religious documents in a way in which we do not, of the techniques naturally and readily available for interpreting passages which could not be interpreted literally, of a kind with our own rules for recognizing metaphor.

The beliefs shared by God and the Church of many centuries which force metaphorical interpretation on the text are not only those of Christian doctrine, but those of science and history, provided by normal secular inquiry. God knows all truths in these fields; so if the Bible is addressed by God to the Church of many centuries, then truths of which that Church also becomes aware may force metaphorical interpretation on biblical passages which, taken with their normal meaning or other literal meaning, contradict them. I noted in Chapter 4 that it suffices to force metaphorical meaning on a passage if many, even if not all, of an intended audience recognize the obvious falsity or irrelevance of what is said if taken non-metaphorically. Hence the falsity of passages of science or history understood in a normal way, evident to God and much of the later Church, even if not to all the early Church, forces reinterpretation on the text. Although (see below) the Fathers recognized the need to interpret metaphorically passages inconsistent with what they believed to be established secular science, there is not, as far as I am aware, any example of Fathers interpreting any passage metaphorically because it was inconsistent with established secular history. The reason for this is of course that there was in their time no secular historical knowledge well enough established to force a metaphorical interpretation on any passages of the Old Testament. But since they were happy to interpret metaphorically historical passages of the Old Testament on doctrinal grounds (e.g. the story of the Garden of Eden); and since they were happy to interpret metaphorically passages inconsistent with contemporary science, they would surely have been equally happy to reinterpret historical passages on the basis of established secular historical knowledge if they had known of any such.

Interpretation of Scripture in such a way as to make it compatible with Christian doctrine and secular knowledge may be simply a matter of taking the passage in a literal way, but one that is other than the normal way (in my sense of 'normal'). In his commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, Augustine set out verse by verse the objections,

⁵¹ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, 8. 1.

largely ones raised by Greek science, to the truth of each verse; and then spelled out a variety of literal interpretations under which the verse could plausibly be true. Thus Greek science held that the 'natural places' of the four elements were in the form of concentric spheres—earth covered by a sphere of water, water by air, air by fire; outside the sphere of fire lay sun, moon, and planets, and finally a solid sphere of stars. The 'dome' of Genesis is naturally taken to be this solid sphere. But then, how could there be water above the 'dome' (1: 7)? And how could gathering the waters under the 'dome' together allow the appearance of dry land (1: 9)? If water already covered the Earth, it would simply flow back again to cover the Earth.⁵² Augustine suggested fairly natural literal meanings for these passages which would render them compatible with Greek science. Maybe, he suggests, the 'dome' just means the air,⁵³ and the 'earth above the waters' is just 'those promontories which tower above the water'.⁵⁴

But such easy treatment is not possible for the 'days of creation'. If we treat Genesis 1 (when taken as a unit authored by a human author) not as a metaphysical fable, but wrongly (I suspect) as a historical narrative whose total truth depends on the truth of each of its constituent sentences; then 'science' (understood in a wide sense) suggests to us, and suggested to the Church of the fourth century AD, that it cannot be taken either straight or historically. Augustine thought this, though of course we have reasons for thinking this other than his reasons. He taught that the 'days' of creation could not be taken literally, because (in his view) there could only be 'days' when there was a sun, and the narrative recorded the creation of the sun only on the fourth day.⁵⁵ Here we must invoke metaphor.

When the passage is to be taken metaphorically, what are the rules for how it is to be taken? For metaphor in all contexts, as we saw in Chapter 3, the rules are: take the words of the passage (apart from words which link it to its context) in their normal (or other literal) senses. Consider the objects or properties normally designated by these words, and objects or properties commonly associated with them. Interpret the words as designating some of these latter objects or properties instead. Take as the true interpretation that which interprets the words as designating objects or properties closely, rather than remotely, connected with their normal designata, in so far as this can be done in a way which makes the

⁵² For these difficulties, see *ibid.* 2. 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 2. 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 2. 14.

sentence appropriate to the context. In so far as there is no one obvious such interpretation, the passage will be ambiguous. As the history of biblical interpretation suggests, these rules do yield the result that many biblical passages are ambiguous, for the Fathers had enormous numbers of rival interpretations of many biblical passages. But perhaps these rules applied strictly do not yield the result that the passages are as ambiguous as that history suggests. For the interpreter should take for first consideration objects or properties *closely* connected with those normally designated by the words at stake. So interpretations which are not too far distant from the literal are to be preferred to more remote ones.

The original revelation recorded in the New Testament, together with a tradition of interpretation of the Old Testament by the rabbis available to us in the second-century AD Mishnah, and the background of the highly metaphorical interpretation of the Old Testament by the first-century AD Alexandrian Jew Philo, provided the early Christian Fathers with a whole set of symbolic meanings (though not ones sufficiently fixed to become new literal meanings) for the people, places, and actions referred to in the Old Testament. They applied these symbolic meanings to provide interpretations both of passages which could be taken in literal ways and of passages which could not be so taken. Christ was the new Moses who led his people out of slavery to sin, in the way in which Moses led them out of slavery to the Egyptians. Christ was the new Joshua (the Hebrew word for 'Jesus') who was leading his people to his kingdom, as Joshua led them to the promised land. The Jews became enslaved again in Babylon, and 'Babylon' comes to represent evil generally. Christ is the 'rock' to which we can cling successfully when storms attack us. All of this led to Origen's rules of interpretation described above. And there was available a standard Jewish allegorical interpretation of the one book which owed its incorporation into the Jewish canon of the Old Testament to the evident need to take it in a non-literal sense: the Song of Songs. The Song, which, taken literally, expresses the sexual love of a man for a woman, was often understood by Jewish commentators metaphorically as expressing God's agapeistic love for Israel, which the Fathers then naturally came to think of as including his love for the new Israel, the Church.

Hence the blessing confessed in Psalm 137: 9 on those who take the 'little ones' of Babylon and dash them against the rock was naturally interpreted as a blessing on those who take the offspring of evil (Babylon) which are our evil inclinations, and destroy them through the power of

Christ ('the rock').⁵⁶ The command to the Israelites invading Canaan to exterminate the Canaanites and the story of the invasion may be interpreted in the same spirit.⁵⁷ As I noted, Jesus was thought of as the new Joshua. So the Canaanites are the evil which is to be conquered if the new Israel, the Church, is to occupy the promised land of the Kingdom of Heaven. In order to occupy an earthly land, its human inhabitants may need to be exterminated. No extermination of other humans is necessary if a given human is to become a member of the Kingdom of Heaven, but he does need to exterminate his evil inclinations.⁵⁸ An allegorical system is therefore readily and naturally available for interpreting any narrative passages in the Book of Joshua which cannot be taken historically, as predictions of what Jesus does for us. And the command to exterminate can be interpreted, *if* we do not wish to take it historically,⁵⁹ as the command to exterminate evil inclinations.

To my mind the metaphorical interpretation nearest to the literal under which Genesis 1's talk of 'days' comes out as plausibly true, and so the preferred metaphorical interpretation, is derived by treating 'days' as long periods of time, and the exact order of creation as not relevant to the truth of the chapter. Then the passage tells us that gradually God brought about the various facets of creation over long periods of time, no doubt through 'secondary causes' (i.e. the normal operation of scientific laws which God sustains), as Genesis 2 suggests. Augustine also took the passage metaphorically, but his interpretation is by comparison a very far-fetched one. He claimed that all the things described in Genesis 1 were created simultaneously, and that talk about 'days' is to be interpreted as talk about stages in the knowledge of creation possessed by the angels.⁶⁰ But 'days' are more like billennia than they are like logical stages in the growth of knowledge. My metaphorical interpretation is, therefore, by normal criteria for metaphorical interpretation, better than his.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Jerome's *Commentary on the Psalms*, 137: 9: "'Little ones' means thoughts ... the Rock is Christ."

⁵⁷ Deut. 20: 17.

⁵⁸ Origen interpreted the story of Joshua's brutal execution of the five kings in Josh. 10: 15–27 allegorically. See the comparison of his treatment of this story with that of others in Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, ch. 5.

⁵⁹ I argue that a God who gives life has the right to take it away (see p. 91), so he has the right to command someone else to take it away for him. In that case a historical interpretation of such passages seems possible.

⁶⁰ See the detailed development of this idea in *De Genesi ad Litteram*, 4. 22.

Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram* contains so many different interpretations of passages that he faced the objection: what have you achieved except to show that we cannot know what these passages of Scripture mean? His answer was: I have shown that Genesis is compatible with whatever physical science might show.⁶¹

THE NEW TESTAMENT

It follows, as Origen affirmed, that since the books of the New Testament, as well as the books of the Old Testament, gain their status as canonical documents through the Church's recognition of their authorization by God, they too must be interpreted in the light of central Christian doctrines proclaimed by the Church as codifying in precise and clear form the essence of the Christian Revelation. (Those doctrines were themselves, we saw in Chapter 8, derived from the simplest overall systematization of New Testament passages, which had consequences for which passages should be interpreted in the light of which other passages.) Thus, clearly some New Testament passages say or imply that Jesus Christ was God and had existed from all eternity: clearly the opening passage of St John's Gospel, for example, carries this implication. On the other hand, as I mentioned in Chapter 7, other New Testament passages do not seem to think of Christ in such exalted terms. There are passages which seem to imply that his exalted status (possibly lower than that of God himself) was acquired subsequently to the Resurrection. I pointed out in Chapter 7 that Romans 1: 4 seems to have the lower Christology (i.e. a lower view of the status of Jesus), when it speaks of Christ as 'declared (*ὁρισθέντος*) to be son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead'. 'Declared to be' might mean 'recognized as', but is more naturally interpreted as 'made'. Also note that 'Son of God' may mean simply a holy person, not necessarily divine. If we neglect other passages in St Paul's letters, and take St John's Gospel and the Letter to the Romans as two separate works written by two separate authors, the most plausible historical interpretation of the latter suggests that its author had a different view from the author of the Gospel about the status of Christ. But if we think of them as having the same ultimate

⁶¹ op. cit. 1. 21.

author, God, who also guided the Church to produce the creeds, the initially less natural interpretation of Romans (not a normal meaning, but a possible literal one) must be the true one. These works have no authority for Christians unless they see them as deriving their authority from the Church's recognition of their authorization by God, and in that case all the rules of textual interpretation force upon them, as their true meaning, a meaning compatible with central Christian doctrine, as formulated by the Church—which includes the divinity of Christ. If you translate *ὁρισθέντος* as 'recognized as', such a meaning begins to emerge, however the phrase 'Son of God' is taken. Saying this is quite compatible with claiming that St Paul himself, at any rate while writing the Letter to the Romans, had a lower Christology; if he did, he was inspired by God to write things whose meaning was a little different from what he supposed.

The example of the previous paragraph merely required understanding an expression not in a normal way, but still in a literal way. Historical and scientific knowledge may, however, also force metaphorical readings on the text of the New Testament books. The most obvious example concerns the Book of Revelation. A careful study of the text in the light of the contemporary history suggests that its human author (or at any rate the human author of a large chunk of it) was predicting the end of the world around the beginning of the second century AD. But the Church which gave it canonical status in the fourth century AD obviously would not have done so if it had understood it in that way. Dionysius of Alexandria in the middle of the third century confesses that he does not understand it and suspects that it should be allegorized;⁶² and there was a considerable tradition of treating it merely allegorically over the next millennium.

MEANING DETERMINED BY FUTURE CONTEXT

If God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and also authorized the central claims of Christian doctrine embodied in the creeds, then, as we have seen, the latter constrain the interpretation of the former for the reason that the creeds are designed to encapsulate the central claims of the faith in as precise a way as possible. But any other truth evident to the

⁶² See R. P. C. Hanson, 'Biblical Exegesis in The Early Church' in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, i. 434–5.

speaker and his audience which shows some sentence understood with a normal or other literal meaning to be false also forces a metaphorical interpretation on the sentence, whether or not that truth is contained in some other written work of the same author. We have seen how Augustine allowed that scientific discovery could force metaphorical interpretation on a text. Augustine belonged to the century which promulgated a canonized Scripture. But if the intended audience of Scripture is the Church, not only of the first century (many of whose members Augustine would have regarded as scientifically backward) or the first four centuries, but of later centuries and millennia, then, I have argued, truth evident to the latter must also be allowed to force a reinterpretation on the text. New scientific and historical discoveries may force that kind of reinterpretation.

The early chapters of the book of Genesis seem to entail (if we try to impose on them a consistent chronology) that humans began to exist about 4,000 BC. Since the nineteenth century, it has become obvious that humanity is much older than that. These chapters also clearly state that various early humans were very long-lived—for example, that Methuselah lived 969 years. That is wildly incompatible with all that we know about the history of early humanity. So we should take words and phrases in passages which state or entail that the world began about 4,000 BC or that Methuselah lived 969 years in senses closest to their normal meanings in which they come out as consistent with the framework of doctrinal definitions with other truth evident to the later church. The first move in this process must be to treat the various stories of those chapters as separate, not intended to provide a consistent history; and, as mentioned earlier, ‘form criticism’ shows that these chapters are composed of stories of quite separate origin. Then there is no need to impose a consistent chronology. There are in these chapters several significant stories which can naturally be regarded as telling us about important stages in the development of the human race, expressed in terms of the acts of particular individuals: the first sin and its consequences (Genesis 3), murder of the successful by the unsuccessful (Genesis 4), the near-elimination of a large part of the human race by flood (Genesis 6–8), and so on. The verses linking these stories containing numbers of years of life ascribed to Methuselah and others may be regarded as simply as saying that there were long periods of time between some of these incidents. ‘Nine hundred and sixty years’ could simply be a poetic way of saying ‘a long time’; and ‘Methuselah’ and ‘Mahalelel’ could be regarded as names of families or races. These suggested interpretations of the text

are not, I repeat, the most natural ones if we think of the Book of Genesis as the work of one human author; but something like them is the most natural way of taking the text if God is supposed to be the author of the whole Bible, and the Church of many centuries the intended audience.

That the meaning of some passages can be seen only in a 'future context' follows from my earlier point that if a social context is known only to a speaker, and not to some of his audience, the latter may not understand the meaning of a passage unless they become familiar with that context. New scientific understanding may reveal the meaning of a passage; and so may new historical understanding. It follows also that predictions (and we have seen that not all prophecies are predictions) may be understood only when the time comes about which the prediction was made. God could foresee the 'future context' of his prediction in advance, and express his prediction in terms of that context, whose meaning would only become clear to those without foreknowledge when the time arrived. Biblical writers were not unaware that he to whom a prediction was given could not always understand it;⁶³ and Augustine taught that the Spirit often inspires people to utter a message which they do not understand.⁶⁴ And some of the Fathers and scholastics taught about predictions, as I have done, that their meaning and truth would become evident at the same time. That is, our understanding some oracle and seeing its fulfilment will be simultaneous; when we see certain things to be so, we will also see that that was what the mysterious passage was getting at. Irenaeus writes, 'every prophecy is to men [full of] enigmas and ambiguities. But when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then the prophecies have a clear and certain exposition.'⁶⁵ And nearly a millennium later Hugh of St Victor wrote about the prophecies of the Old Testament that no one could understand them 'before they were fulfilled. They were sealed and none could loose their seals but the Lion of the tribe of Judah' (viz. Christ).⁶⁶

The tradition of reinterpretation of biblical prophecy in the light of history is itself a biblical tradition. Daniel 9 reinterprets Jeremiah's talk

⁶³ The purported author of the Book of Daniel claimed not to understand his prophecies—'I heard, but I understood not' (Dan. 12: 8).

⁶⁴ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus*, 2. 1. 1. The examples which he gives are of those who see visions and utter words, recorded in the Bible; not of biblical authors themselves. But application of his thesis to the biblical authors seems to result from his teaching about what inspiration amounts to.

⁶⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4. 26.

⁶⁶ Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalion*, trans. J. Taylor (Columbia University Press, 1961, 6.6.)

of 'seventy years' (Jer. 2: 12) as seventy 'weeks of years'; and 2 Esdras 12: 11–12 reinterprets Daniel 7: 17. Those in that tradition would not have been unduly disconcerted to discover that in its original context the Book of Daniel prophesied an 'end' in the second century BC, or that the Book of Revelation prophesied an 'end' in the second century AD. They would have reflected that the meaning of the prophecies was something other than the original understanding of them; and that time would show what that meaning was. Perhaps too, the literal 'failure' of the prophecy makes clear that all prophecy is warning, not prediction; and maybe that warning was heeded by someone.

Historical investigation may also reveal how the attributions of human authorship in the Bible are to be understood. If Moses is not the literal author of the first five books of the Bible, then their attribution to him must be understood in a much more liberal way. I have argued that the attribution of 'authorship' was so understood by the then secular criteria in biblical times. My point here is that even if it was not, the view that God was the ultimate author of the Bible in a strong sense, and so the presuppositions which he shares with the Church of many centuries, including such historical knowledge as the latter comes to acquire, dictate how it is to be understood; this understanding forces on the text the more liberal understanding of attribution of human authorship.

I repeat that the account which I have now given of how Scripture is to be interpreted if God is supposed to be its ultimate author, and the Church of future centuries its intended audience, follows from the general rules for interpreting texts which I described in Part I. Investigate who is the author, who is the intended audience, what is the genre, and what are the conventions for interpreting works of that genre, interpret a work in terms of a preface or other guide, take as metaphorical what the author cannot have intended in a literal sense, and so on, are all very general rules for understanding works in no way peculiar to the Bible. It's just that they give results far from obvious to modern people when applied to this case. Treating the Bible 'like any other book' in the way you interpret it has the consequence that it turns out to be very unlike any other book in its pattern and structure.

AUTHORIZATION

So far I have been investigating the meaning of the biblical text on the assumption that God is its author in the strong sense that not merely

did he authorize its publication in his name but he ensured in advance that the message of each of its sentences was as it was, while allowing it to be expressed in the styles of its various human authors and compilers. Holy Scripture, said Gregory the Great, is 'a letter of God almighty to his creature', from which it followed that it was not important who was the human author of its various books.⁶⁷ This assumption has the consequence, in view of what we know about the process by which the Bible was composed, that what God inspired its human authors and compilers to do was to put together material whose meaning would depend on which other material was eventually incorporated into a Bible promulgated as Christian Scripture. God inspired the human authors and compilers to see things which had quite a bit of truth in them; but what they wrote down, taken on its own, had quite a lot of falsity too. They would often have understood much, but would not have understood all, and would sometimes have misunderstood some of what they were inspired to produce. What they wrote was ambiguous in the sense that a fuller context could give it a different meaning from what it would have on its own. God did provide that later context which made what they wrote down have meanings such as I have illustrated on pp. 273–6, and thus to express statements which were entirely true. Progressively more explicit understanding of aspects of a tradition not previously drawn out is a phenomenon known in literary, scientific, and philosophical traditions; if God is the author of the Christian doctrinal tradition and knows where it is going, what comes first is to be understood in the light of what comes later. This account thus brings out the continuity between the two ways of interpreting Scripture (straight or historical, and metaphorical). The human authors grasped much of God's nature and purposes. But where they misunderstood them, what they wrote down had sufficient truth in it so that, in a larger context, it came to have a meaning which it would not have on its own, in which it was altogether true.

However, the considerations of Chapter 8 for determining what is central Christian doctrine might lead us to hold that there is only sufficient historical warrant for giving this high status to the moderate view of the divine authorization of the Bible. This is the view that while God authorized the publication of the Bible in his name and inspired the human authors to write and the compilers to compile the books they did; not merely did those human authors have their own styles and

⁶⁷ Gregory the Great, *Epistolae*, 4. 31; and *Moralium*, Praefatio, 2 and 3.

presuppositions through which (as the strong view allowed) God sought to breathe his message, but also the human authors and compilers were not fully open to divine truth.⁶⁸ The human authors allowed some small amount of falsity on important matters to infect Scripture, and/or the canonizers were not fully open to divine guidance with respect to which books they canonized. Nevertheless, God had authorized in advance the propagation of the relevant message and did not subsequently withdraw that authorization, but left us to detect minor errors. The Bible, then, is like a symphony written and conducted by a genius, but played by an orchestra of wilful amateurs.

But that is not going to make much difference to how we interpret the Bible's message, which statements we understand to be expressed by its sentences. For how are we to recognize the aberrations which human authors have introduced into the biblical message? In the same way as we would recognize errors of transmission in any other work of art or literature: by their discrepancy with the main message and with other known beliefs of the author. So on either view—if God is the Bible's ultimate author—we should not understand in a straight or historical sense any passages which taken straight or historically would be inconsistent with central Christian doctrines (revealed to the Church by God) or other known scientific and historical truth. Either way, Psalm 137: 9 must be assessed in the light of central Christian doctrines. With respect to such passages, the only difference is that on the strong view we should regard all passages which (taken straight or historically) are inconsistent with central Christian doctrines or known scientific or historical truth as having a true metaphorical meaning; whereas on the moderate view, instead of interpreting all these passages straight or historically, we may allow that some of them are simply false. (On the moderate view, a human author inserted into Psalm 137 a vengeful sentiment contrary to divine inspiration.) But unless the moderate view claimed that no sentences which are false when interpreted straight or historically express true metaphorical statements (which would lead to

⁶⁸ Clearly this view must be taken in so far as there was any deliberate deceit as opposed to mere lack of understanding, in the production of biblical books—in the way discussed on p. 249 with respect to two letters attributed to St Paul. If the human author was other than St Paul, and he attributed these letters to St Paul and filled them with personal Pauline details, not simply in accordance with the current conventions of manifest or traditional pseudepigraphy, but going beyond them in order to deceive his readers into supposing they were written by St Paul, we cannot suppose the author to have been open fully to divine inspiration. For a perfectly good God cannot inspire a human author to write something which he recognizes as deceptive.

it regarding quite a lot of the Bible as false), it would need a criterion for distinguishing among those passages which are false when taken straight or historically, those which are just false, and those which express a metaphorical truth. But it is difficult to see what the criterion could be.

Still, if the moderate view could produce such a criterion, there might then seem to be the difference between the two views that on the strong view the Bible would have more true content than on the moderate view. While on the strong view the Bible would contain true metaphorical statements made by all the sentences which could not be interpreted straight or historically; on the moderate view only some of the sentences which could not be interpreted straight or historically would express true metaphorical statements. (The others would be simply false.) But even if the moderate view had a requisite criterion, there would still, I suspect, be very little difference between the two views in respect of what they claimed we could learn from the Bible, additional to what we already knew about science and history. This is because when sentences are given a metaphorical meaning constrained by central Christian doctrine and known historical and scientific truth, there is often no more to the content of the metaphorical meaning most naturally ascribed to them than some item of central Christian doctrine or historical and scientific knowledge, or some other piece of historical information provided in the Bible which there is little historical reason to doubt, to which we are already committed. For example, there are some stories concerned with the life of Jesus, which New Testament critics have supposed not to have much historical basis, such as the story of the massacre of the innocent children by Herod, from which Jesus escaped through the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt.⁶⁹ On both views we must treat the story as true history unless the historical evidence against this is strong. If that counter-evidence is strong, then on the strong view of divine authorship we must interpret the story metaphorically. The most natural metaphorical interpretation of this story is that it is a historical fable about the wickedness of secular rulers in general (not necessarily Herod) from which for our sake Jesus was preserved (by various means, not necessarily a flight into Egypt). On the moderate view we could treat the story simply as false, an unjustified insertion by the Gospel writer. But on neither view is the story historically accurate, and both views are already committed to the fact that wicked rulers did not prevent Jesus from preaching the Gospel, being crucified, and rising

⁶⁹ Matt. 2: 13–18.

again. Sometimes, however, there could be an obvious metaphorical interpretation of a passage which would add something to what both views were already committed to; and in that case (if the moderate view had a criterion whereby this should not be taken as metaphorical) the strong view would allow us to derive more information from the Bible than the moderate view. But I suspect that there are not many such passages. So long as your view of the divine authorization of the Bible allows that the fact that some sentences occur in the Bible is strong *prima facie* reason for believing them to be true, as do both the strong and the moderate view, it makes little difference which of these views you hold.

It is only if you hold that the fact that some sentences occur in the Bible is not very strong reason for believing them to be true, and so regard the individual books of the Bible as basically of human origin, that there will be a difference in the way you understand the Bible's message. In that case you would cease to regard the Bible as a whole as having a message at all, whether or not one which was occasionally corrupted in detail. But that is a view clearly at odds with central Christian doctrine, and to be rejected if one sees the Church as having divine authority to interpret the original revelation. So, on the assumption that it makes little difference to the message of the Bible whether one adopts a strong or a moderate view of biblical authorization, I shall continue to operate with the strong view. And on either view, the Bible can only amplify but not refute those doctrines.

But why a Bible with such complicated rules of interpretation? Why not instead a 500-page creed similar to the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but issued in the first century AD and subject to no amplification or revision? For the kind of reasons developed in Chapter 5. There is point in lesser revelations before a final one, in order to enable humans to help each other to develop morally and theologically and to make themselves ready to receive the final revelation. We find a record of these revelations in the Old Testament, mixed with human confusions. The particular is sacred. A record of how God interacted with humans and helped them to help each other to develop in these ways should be preserved for its own sake and to help us as individuals to travel along the same road. The details of the life of Jesus and of the early church bring to life the object of Christian faith and the way it should be lived in difficult circumstances. Then a Bible allows children and the uneducated who cannot understand the subtleties of creeds to get very simple messages from very simple stories: for example, to get

from the story of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32) the simple message that God is not a material object. God provides a book from which the simple can get simple true messages; but when the simple stories suggest false messages (e.g. the Book of Judges might suggest to some that God wants Christians to exterminate non-Christians), then there are available the other parts of the Bible and the Church's tradition of teaching to correct the misunderstanding. It is good that humans should work out their understanding of revelation in co-operation with each other, trying to get into focus various Christian documents through a developing understanding of science and history; and wrestling with the biblical text with the help of others who have done the same under the guidance of basic Christian doctrine is a profound way of doing this. Just because it is initially unclear whether a passage is to be taken literally or metaphorically, we need to work out whether it is consistent with central Christian doctrine and other evident truth, and that helps us to deepen our religious understanding and hand on a deeper faith to the next generation. The framework of the Church and its doctrinal definitions guarantees that any misunderstanding of the Bible on central matters will not be too long-lasting. And finally, because we do not have the words to express many deep Christian truths, we need metaphor, and we need many metaphors developing a point at length if we are to understand the message; and a developed allegory may well sometimes get a point home to us better than a 500-page creed. Thus this complicated way of expressing doctrine reminds us of what a 500-page creed would hide from us, that divine truth is often far too profound to be captured adequately by any human sentences. We thus get in the Bible, as interpreted by the Church via its doctrinal definitions, the advantages described in Chapter 5 of both culture-relative and culturally independent revelation.

THE TRADITION OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Since the way of understanding the Bible which I have derived from basic philosophical principles, with its consequence that many a passage has to be interpreted in metaphorical ways to yield a meaning which is not that of the passage taken in the context of its biblical book by itself, will seem very strange to many modern readers, I will end this chapter by emphasizing just how normal it was in the pre-Reformation Church.

Teaching very similar to that of Origen is given by Gregory of Nyssa in the Prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs. There is much immoral conduct apparently commended in the Old Testament, Gregory points out: 'What benefit to virtuous living can we obtain from the prophet Hosea [Hos. 1: 2], or from Isaiah having intercourse with a prophetess [Isa. 8: 31] unless something else lies beyond the mere letter.'⁷⁰ But the 'mere letter' is only 'the apparent reprehensible sense'; a metaphorical interpretation turns it 'into something having a divine meaning'. And he goes on to illustrate this with his interpretation of all the literature attributed to Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and above all the Song of Songs. The Solomon to whom (1 Kgs. 3: 12 claims) God gave 'a wise and discerning mind', declaring to him that 'no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you' is not, according to Gregory, the historical Solomon who was not so wise or holy, but 'another Solomon' 'whose wisdom is infinite': namely, Christ. Christ 'used Solomon as an instrument and speaks to us through his voice'.⁷¹ The highest point of the Solomonic literature is the Song of Songs: 'What is described there is a marriage; but what is understood is the union of the human soul with God.'⁷²

While Gregory exercised a powerful influence on the Eastern church, by far the most powerful influence on the Western church in all respects, including the interpretation of Scripture, for the next millennium was Augustine. Although he saw much less need for denying a literal meaning to biblical texts than did Origen and Gregory, his basic rule for interpreting Scripture is the same as that of Origen and Gregory:

We must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as metaphorical.⁷³

And among the things which, Augustine claimed, constrain us to interpret certain passages metaphorically are, as we saw earlier, the discoveries of physical science. On the whole Augustine seems to think that the metaphorical meaning which his rules enable him to detect is that of the biblical writer, though he does in principle grant the point that the Holy Spirit may inspire humans to say things whose deep

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. C. McCambley (Hellenic College Press, 1987), 36–7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 44. ⁷² *Ibid.* 47.

⁷³ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 3. 10. 14.

meaning is hidden from them.⁷⁴ Gregory (see his claim about Solomon) seems to think of Christ, and Origen of the Holy Spirit, as the authors of the Bible, and the human writer to be irrelevant. In view of the way the Bible was composed, one cannot think of any biblical passage as having just one human author; and the logic of my argument and that of Origen, Gregory, and Augustine certainly does not lead us to suppose that any human author always fully understood the meaning of any passage he wrote, when its meaning was given only by the larger whole into which it was inserted.

Not all the early Fathers made explicit acknowledgement of a rule such as that of Augustine for when passages should be interpreted with a literal meaning and when they should be interpreted metaphorically, yet they all allowed that metaphor, typology, and allegory have their role in the Bible, and no one suggested any rival rule for distinguishing passages to be understood metaphorically from passages to be understood literally. Those many of the Fathers, belonging to what is known as the Antiochene as opposed to the Alexandrian tradition of exegesis,⁷⁵ held that allegorizing often went too far. As St Basil wrote: 'For me grass is grass; plant, fish, wild beast, domestic animal, I take all in the literal sense. "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel."' ⁷⁶ But all the Fathers interpreted some passages metaphorically. There began however quickly to develop the view that all passages had at least one and maybe two or three metaphorical meanings, whether or not they also had a literal meaning.⁷⁷ As I illustrated earlier, the New Testament certainly recognizes the 'double meaning' of certain passages, but the doctrine that all passages had three or four meanings, although common in patristic and medieval times, never became official doctrine, and the normal public rules for recognizing metaphor do not force it on the text.

⁷⁴ See n. 64

⁷⁵ For description of these traditions, see Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, pt. I. Hanson's most valuable book goes on to describe the use made by Origen of the available typologies and allegories.

⁷⁶ St Basil, *In hexaemeron*, 9. 1, trans. B. Jackson (James Parker and Co., 1895).

⁷⁷ Origen recognized three different meanings of Scripture (*On First Principles*, 4. 2.4; see commentary thereon in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 75). Augustine recognized four different meanings of Scripture (*De utilitate credendi*, 5–8). Both writers, however, held that not all passages could be interpreted 'literally'. The 'fourfold' scheme of interpretation was common in the Middle Ages. Origen claimed that 'the entire church is unanimous' in holding that the Scriptures 'have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers' (*On First Principles*, Preface; Latin translation by Rufinus).

While, as I illustrated earlier, many of the early metaphorical interpretations of biblical passages understood as parts of a whole Bible authorized by God, seem sensible ones, it cannot be denied that in later patristic times allegorizing often went wild. Passages to which there was no reason to any meaning other than a literal one were supposed to have one or more clear metaphorical meanings, and sometimes not a literal meaning at all; and the metaphorical meanings were generated by quite new armouries of typology unknown to the Bible's first Christian expositors.

Consider Maximus the Confessor, the dominant theologian in the Eastern church in the later patristic centuries. In his *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* he answers many questions about the meaning of scriptural passages. Although he thinks that many of the passages which he discusses are literally true, he thinks that in the case of many of the Old Testament passages the literal meaning is spiritually worthless, and we should seek the important deep metaphorical meaning. Some historical incident which Scripture records may indeed have occurred, but it has no importance; what matters is the metaphorical meaning of the text (so presumably that is the message of the divine author). His treatment can be illustrated by just one passage which he reasonably does not think should be construed as a literal prophecy: Zechariah 4: 10a. The text of this passage may well be corrupt, and its meaning is certainly obscure. It is part of Zechariah's vision of the seven-branched lampstand. In the King James Bible translation, based on a text nearer to that known to Maximus than the one translated in some more modern translations, it reads: 'They shall rejoice and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord which run to and fro through the whole Earth.' Maximus⁷⁸ reads it as saying that the plummet is decorated with the seven eyes of the Lord, which look over the whole Earth. He claims that this is nonsense when words are taken in literal senses. But Zerubbabel, he claims, represents Christ. This is a plausible interpretation, as Zerubbabel was the governor of Judaea in the immediate post-exilic period, for whom the prophet Haggai prophesied greater things, presumably kingship;⁷⁹ he was to be the restored David. The plummet, or 'stone' of lead as he reads it, Maximus interprets as

⁷⁸ PG 90. 521. For exposition of Maximus's treatment of Scripture generally, see J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, ii: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), ch. 1.

⁷⁹ Hag. 2: 23.

'faith in Christ'. New Testament talk of Christ as the rock or stone, on which we can build securely, suggests that—although not too naturally. But then the interpretation becomes less plausible. Maximus reads the text as saying that Zerubbabel holds the plummet; and holding, he says, is an active thing, a work. Hence faith is manifested by the active process of works; and he quotes St James's saying that 'faith without works is dead'.⁸⁰ The seven eyes of faith are the 'seven' gifts of the Spirit or virtues, described by Isaiah.⁸¹ So Christ, by actively grasping the stone of faith, shows that faith is manifested by the work of practising the virtues, and the verse says that people will see that and rejoice. This is a tortuous interpretation, and one which others could easily recognize as going far beyond the typological interpretation of Old Testament ritual provided in the Letter to the Hebrews, or the interpretations by the Fathers of the Song of Songs quoted earlier. But it serves as an example of just how deeply rooted in the Church's tradition is metaphorical interpretation of Scripture. Better and less frequent metaphorical interpretations belong to the tradition; to avoid them altogether would be to abandon it.

So there was this wide tradition in the early Church of reading the Bible metaphorically and not always also literally; it was the Church of those centuries, the Church of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, which established the canon of Scripture which taught that this was the way in which it ought to be read. It was the Bible understood in this way which they declared to be true. (Gregory was a leading bishop at the First Council of Constantinople which approved the insertion into the Nicene Creed of the phrase about the Holy Spirit, that he 'spoke through the prophets'.) The rebirth of learning in the West in the twelfth century led to considerable scriptural study, the most famous centre for which was the Abbey of St Victor at Paris. About the year 1127 Hugh of St Victor wrote his *Didascalion*, the latter part of which was concerned with the principles of scriptural exegesis; it proved a work widely influential in the Middle Ages. His basic principles were those of Origen and Augustine; and he advised against too quick a resort to non-literal senses. 'Sacred Scripture', Hugh claimed, 'has three ways of conveying meaning—namely history, allegory, and tropology.' By 'allegory' in the narrow sense in which he uses the term in this paragraph, Hugh understands a metaphorical interpretation conveying Christian doctrine; by 'tropology' he understands a metaphorical interpretation conveying moral instruction. 'To be sure', he continues, 'all things in

⁸⁰ Jas. 1: 26.

⁸¹ Isa. 11: 2.

the divine utterance must not be wrenched to an interpretation such that each of them is held to contain history, allegory, and tropology all at once', as some had taught.

Even if a triple meaning can appropriately be assigned in many passages, nevertheless it is either difficult or impossible to see it everywhere ... In the divine utterances are placed certain things which are intended to be understood spiritually only, certain things that emphasize the importance of moral conduct, and certain things said according to the simple sense of history.⁸²

There are, he repeats, 'certain places in the divine page which cannot be read literally'.⁸³ But care has to be exercised in construing a passage allegorically. You need to know the rest of your Bible; he does not 'think that you will be able to become perfectly sensitive to allegory unless you have first been grounded in history'.⁸⁴ But above all, passages have to be read in such a way as to be consonant with the Christian faith: 'The very bases of your spiritual structure are certain principles of the faith, principles which form your starting point.'⁸⁵ And he commends those who 'know how to bend all Scriptural passages whatever into fitting interpretation and to judge both what is out of keeping with sound faith and what is consonant with it'.

By and large this general spirit of interpretation continued, despite much more emphasis on the normal (or other literal) senses of words, during the later Middle Ages and to some extent in the work of the classical Reformers.⁸⁶ But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Bible came to be interpreted by many Anglo-Saxon Protestants in

⁸² Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalion*, 5. 2.

⁸³ Ibid. 6. 4.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 6. 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 6. 4.

⁸⁶ See A. E. McGrath, *Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), ch. 6, for the hermeneutics of the immediate pre- and post-Reformation period. Reformers took over a pre-Reformation distinction between two 'literal' meanings of the Old Testament, the 'carnal' or 'rabbinical' meaning and the 'prophetic' meaning in which the Old Testament was read as concerned with Christ. The 'prophetic literal' meaning was in no way a literal meaning, to use my terminology. It involved reading the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, as interpreted by Christian doctrine; so, in my terminology, metaphorically. For example, the 'David' of the Psalms was read as 'Christ'. So while neither Luther nor Zwingli went along with the medieval fourfold interpretation of Scripture (see my n. 77), and both advocated the 'literal meaning' alone, this is misleading if we do not take into account that this often meant the 'literal prophetic' meaning. See McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 157, 159, and 169. However, not all the Reformers had the same canons of interpretation. And I do not think that Luther and other Reformers could have had any justification for interpreting a passage as having a 'prophetic literal meaning', unless they had been prepared to allow more authority to the Church as an interpreter of doctrine than their other writings allow.

perhaps the most literal and insensitive way in which it has ever been interpreted in Christian history. This literalism was encouraged by the basic philosophical mistake of equating the 'original meaning' of the text, gradually being probed by historical inquiry, with the meaning of the text in the context of a Christian document. We may hanker after the 'original meaning' in the sense of the meaning of the separate units before they were used to form a Bible, but that sense is *not* relevant to assessing its truth; for the Bible is a patchwork, and context changes meaning.

In the end, for someone who longs to interpret the Bible in terms of the 'original meaning' of its books, there is always one acid test of whether this is a reasonable construal of the Bible as canonized and promulgated as a Christian book by the Church of early centuries: how do you interpret the Song of Songs? It is ludicrous to suppose that any Church Father, even the most 'literal-minded' one, would have supposed that its meaning was its meaning as a book on its own. On its own it is an erotic love poem. They would all have said that its meaning was to be understood in terms of its place in a Christian Bible. Just as the rabbis had interpreted it as concerned with God's agapeistic love for the old Israel, so now the Church Fathers normally interpreted it as concerned with God's love either for Israel, now including the new Israel (the Church), or (see above) for the human soul. Even those Church Fathers who protested against the allegorical interpretations of other passages interpreted allegorically here and in some other places as well. There is no justification whatever for them or for us to regard the Song as a special case; whatever rules apply to it apply generally. The genetic fallacy that origins determine present operation leads us to suppose that we understand the meaning of a text when we understand its literary history. But we do not; what we need to know is its present literary, social, and cultural context, not its history.

Of course, if we are misguided enough to interpret the Bible in terms of the 'original meaning' of the text, that original meaning is often false: there is scientific, historical, moral, and theological falsity in the Bible, if it is so interpreted. This evident fact led many liberal-minded theologians of the twentieth century to cease to talk of the Bible being 'true', but to speak rather of it being 'useful' or 'insightful' if read in accordance with some rule or other of interpretation; and there have evolved as many ways of interpreting as there have been theologians to do the interpreting. And saying this sort of thing about the Bible hardly gives it a special status; the same could be said of any great work of

literature. A general fog settled over 'hermeneutics'.⁸⁷ Yet, as the Church of the first 1,500 years of Christianity always taught explicitly, the Bible must be understood in the light of the Church's teaching, and this will mean at least what I have called central Christian doctrines. And the rules for interpreting passages seemingly dissonant with Christian doctrine or known truths of history or science are there, sanctified by centuries of use by those who claimed in accordance with Christian tradition that the Bible was 'true'. If we wish to take seriously claims for the truth of the Bible, we must understand it in the way that both philosophical rules for interpreting other texts and the teaching of the Church which gave canonical status to the biblical books indicate; and this includes their admission that it contains deeper truths which future generations wiser than themselves might detect by using their rules.⁸⁸ Interpreted in this way, the Bible can only be very improbable if the Church's other central doctrines in the light of which it has to be interpreted are very improbable. On the assumption that this cannot be shown, it follows that the central Christian doctrine of the authority of the Bible cannot be rendered very improbable by any evidence at all. And, given the Church's status as the interpreter of revelation, the arguments for which I deployed earlier, it will follow that every statement it makes is probably true.

⁸⁷ See Additional Note E on the hermeneutical principles of some recent theologians.

⁸⁸ The declaration of the Second Vatican Council on revelation, *Dei Verbum*, emphasized the crucial points that biblical books 'have God as their originator (*auctorem*)' (Tanner, 975), and that to understand a passage we must understand the genre of the book to which it belongs and must consider it as part of the whole Bible: 'In order to get at what the biblical writers intended, attention should be paid (among other things) to literary *genres* ... Further, holy scripture requires to be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit through whom it was written. Consequently a right understanding of the sacred texts demands attention, to the content and coherence of scripture as a whole, taking into account the whole church's living tradition and the sense of perspective given by faith' (Tanner, 976).

11

Moral Teaching

THE FOUR CATEGORIES OF MORAL OBLIGATION

The teaching which Christians claim to have been revealed includes not merely theological truths (in my sense, that is truths about the nature of God and his actions in history, how he redeems humans, and the kind of life he will give us after death), but also moral truths about how we ought (or how it is good, or bad) to behave towards other humans. These two areas are of course connected. We need to have some knowledge of such moral truths in order to know which good acts we should be prepared to do in order to secure our redemption. But it will be useful to consider the revelation of moral truths separately from the revelation of theological truths for several reasons.

First, theological statements resulted (in the way described in Ch. 8) from much systematizing of biblical texts, some of which had to be interpreted in terms of categories derived from Greek philosophy in ways which were far from obvious. By contrast, there was so much detailed traditional Christian moral teaching about which almost all Christians were in agreement for the first 1,800 years of Christianity, which could be expressed in the form of a collection of quotations from the Bible or the earliest Christian writers; for example, the ‘Ten Commandments’, whose original location was in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy,¹ were so often repeated word for word in Christian manuals. The unanimity of all ecclesial bodies for most of Christian history with respect to much of this teaching and the importance given to it, suggests that (much of it) counts as central Christian doctrine by the criteria of Chapter 8. There was of course always a need for casuistry—that is, explaining how simple rules applied to difficult cases: for example (especially during the iconoclastic controversy) explaining with respect to the second commandment what constituted the forbidden act of

¹ Exod. 20: 1–17; Deut. 5: 6–21.

'bowing down to' or 'worshipping' an 'idol'. But there was little dispute about what constituted central cases of conforming to or not conforming to most of the commandments: for example, what constituted adultery,² forbidden by the seventh commandment. The most general claims of Christian morality are of course contained in the most general teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and in particular in the Sermon on the Mount. But it is not obvious how Jesus's very general teaching fits with the detailed moral teaching contained elsewhere in the Bible and in Church tradition. Although various Christian theologians have tried to produce a systematically integrated system of Christian morality (such as the 'natural law' scheme mentioned in Ch. 5), such integrated schemes (unlike the integrated schemes of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation) have not had the kind of authority possessed by the biblical sentences, or by some collection of quotations from the Christian Fathers of some unanimously held view.

Secondly, theological truths (apart from those created by a performative utterance such as a promise or an act of forgiveness) are true whether or not they have been revealed. Revelation merely informs us of what otherwise would be hidden. If God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, that would have been so whether or not God revealed to us that he did become incarnate. I argued in Chapter 5 that while there are also many moral truths which hold whether or not God tells us about them, it is also the case that actions can be made obligatory (wrong, good, or bad) by the command (or commendation) of God. God commanding us, and thus revealing to us that he is commanding us (for a secret command is not a command), to do some action makes it obligatory to do it. Revelation of moral truths can create them in a way that revelation of doctrinal truths (normally) does not. (I shall not say much in this chapter about the supererogatory good or infravetatorily bad, and the relation of God's commendations and discommendations to that, simply for reasons of space. But it should be apparent from what I say about obligation, what are the consequences for the supererogatory good or infravetatorily bad.)

And thirdly, although the reports of God's commands in Scripture are therefore often seen as reporting God's creation of obligations,

² Given that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, this has remained clear enough. But if homosexual marriage were allowed as a possibility, what constitutes 'adultery' would not be so clear. Nor would it be at all clear if some of the other possibilities considered in Ch. 2 (p. 35) were realized.

one all-important issue of interpretation concerns to whom are the commands issued—to a group who first heard them, or to some larger group including the former, or perhaps to everyone.³ This issue of ‘for whom was it meant’ does not arise with revelation of doctrine. So because of these three differences, I am devoting a separate chapter to revelation of moral truth.

I argued in Chapter 5 that the word of God to us about our moral obligations may fall into four different categories.

To the first category belongs any necessary moral truth about how all humans ought to act, to which God cannot make exceptions. There is of course at least one such moral truth: that everyone has a duty to obey the commands of God. That truth could not be created by a divine command; for if it did not hold independently of divine command, the command would not create it. I argued in Chapter 5 that it holds because God is our supreme benefactor, in virtue of wider necessary moral truths that we have an obligation to thank and please benefactors, and to reverence the good, wise, and great. (in proportion to their greatness, etc.). Hence, as Scotus claimed,⁴ the first three of the Ten Commandments come into this first category. It follows that the fifth of the Ten Commandments, ‘Honour your father and mother’, must also form a first-category obligation (at any rate so long as one’s father and mother are not merely biological but are also nurturing parents). I suggested that it is highly plausible to hold that there are further other necessary moral truths in this category. As examples (though I stress that nothing turns on whether I am right about exactly which moral obligations belong in this category) I suggested the obligation to keep a just promise (i.e. one that you have the right to make—not e.g. a promise to murder someone), and the obligation not to tell a lie (possibly subject to certain qualifications), above all in a legal situation (the ninth of the Ten Commandments). If, as well as informing us about such necessary truths, God commands us to fulfil them—as the Bible typically represents him as doing—then it becomes doubly obligatory to do so.

The second category contains any necessary truth about how all humans ought to act unless God permits otherwise; and again, if God commands us to act in accordance with such a truth, doing so becomes

³ One of Augustine’s rules for interpreting Scripture is: ‘to recognize that some commands are given to all in common, others to particular classes of persons’ (*De Doctrina Christiana*, 3. 17. 25). See pp. 90–4.

⁴ See Additional Note C. Scotus, however, regards all of commandments 4–10 as subject to the will of God.

doubly obligatory. I argued in Chapter 5 that the obligation not to kill (the sixth commandment) subject to two qualifications discussed there, is in this category. If there is no God, my life is not a gift to me from anyone. My parents did not intend to give me life; at most, they intentionally set in motion biological processes which would produce a child—it turned out (not through their choice) to be me. But, I argued, if there is a God, the life of each of us is a temporary gift from God; he sustains the biological processes which lead to a birth, determines whose birth it will be, and keeps us alive subsequently. God has the right to take a temporary gift away when he chooses, and so the right to permit or make it obligatory for someone else to do so. And what goes for the sixth commandment goes also for the seventh, eighth, and tenth commandments forbidding taking from them someone's spouse or property. For since my spouse or my property are also temporary gifts from God, he may allow or oblige others to take them away. But, barring express divine permission, no one may take from someone else their life or spouse or property. It does not need God to bring it about that we have no right (barring his permission) to take away from another person their life or spouse or property. But he may command us not to do so, and then his command will make it doubly obligatory not to do so.

To the third category belongs any obligation created by the command of God to all humans for all time to do some action which would not otherwise be obligatory. Plausibly, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself',⁵ with the sense of 'neighbour' suggested by the parable of the Good Samaritan as anyone with whom one is in contact, is in this category. As I noted in Chapter 5, obligations in general arise from benefits received by us and not rejected, and from voluntary commitments of ours. In virtue of the former, we have obligations to our parents. In virtue of the latter, we have obligations to our children to whom (under God) we give life, to feed and educate them. And obligations to a wider family arise from obligations to parents and grandparents to care for their other offspring and descendants. And obligations to neighbours in a narrow sense arise from continuing interaction. But an obligation to strangers—above all, an obligation to love them 'as ourselves'—is more demanding than all that; and this, I suggest, requires a divine command. Without such a command, such love would be supererogatorily good, but not obligatory.

⁵ Mark 12: 31.

To the fourth category belongs any obligation created by God's command to certain groups of humans or individual humans. God's commands to individuals and groups will include commands to perform a one-off task; but I shall not consider either of these further in this chapter, as their content is not part of Christian doctrine.⁶ But I shall consider commands to groups—for example, the Israelites before Christ—laying down general principles of conduct. Plausibly, the fourth commandment, 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy', is in this category. But for a divine command, there would have been no obligation to rest from labour on the seventh day rather than on the sixth day, for example. One reason for God issuing such a command would have been the co-ordination reason (A, p. 93). It was good that Israelites should worship together, but there may be no particular reason why they should worship together on a Saturday rather than on any other particular day of the week. But a command to worship on that particular day will secure common worship.

INTERPRETING THE MORAL INJUNCTIONS OF BIBLE OR CHURCH TRADITION

Biblical books, although declared by the Church to be authorized by God, were written by human authors who often refer to themselves; and the moral instruction which the books contain is often in the form of moral instruction given by the human authors (e.g. 'I forbid so-and-so'). Recognition of the divine authorization of the books involves recognition that such instruction comes from God. To this there is one obvious exception. There are passages where the author gives moral instruction while disclaiming divine authority for it—Paul writes occasionally that 'I and not the Lord [Jesus]' am giving certain advice.⁷ This disclaimer of any authorization by Jesus, and so by God, makes the advice, which includes quite a bit of what Paul has to say about divorce and celibacy, merely the advice of a good human and not his communication of a divine command.

⁶ Hence I shall not discuss the reasons God might have for commanding an individual or group to perform an action which would otherwise be wrong (e.g. Abraham sacrificing Isaac; Gen. 22: 1–19).

⁷ e.g. 1 Cor. 7: 12.

With this exception, the rules for interpretation of the moral teaching of the Bible must be the same as for interpretation of other biblical sentences: distinguish presupposition from statement, interpret literally (and in the most normal of literal ways, given a God-authorized Bible) where compatible with central Christian doctrines and other known truths, otherwise metaphorically with a meaning as close to the literal as possible. The restriction that biblical passages must be interpreted consistently with basic Christian doctrine forces us to interpret much Old Testament moral instruction in a metaphorical way. We saw in the previous chapter, for example, how Psalm 137: 9, the blessing conferred on those who take ‘the little ones’ of ‘Babylon’ and ‘dash them against the rock’ is to be read as a blessing on those who destroy their wicked inclinations by the power of Christ. By contrast, as with theological definitions, any formal moral teaching by church authorities (e.g. Ecumenical Councils, or the agreed teaching of church Fathers) must (normally) be taken in the normal way, since the sentence means what the humans who issued it and those to whom it was directed would (normally) have understood it to mean. But there remains the need to distinguish any statement, and also now any command, from the presuppositions of the sentence by which it was expressed.

Having clarified the nature of each piece of teaching, we need next to use certain tests to see to which (if any) of my four categories it can plausibly be ascribed. The first test is whether the moral teaching is something discernible by natural reason (i.e. without invoking revelation)—for example, discoverable by an atheist. If so, it will belong to category 1 or 2; if not, then that is reason to suppose that it belongs to category 3 or 4—though not conclusive reason, for there may be necessary truths of morality that humans (or at any rate twenty-first-century humans) are not clever enough to discover. In distinguishing whether some piece of biblical moral instruction apparently not discoverable by natural reason belongs to category 3 (binding on everyone) or category 4 (meant only for certain groups), we must utilize one basic principle central to Christian doctrine for all biblical interpretation. This is the principle on which I commented in the previous chapter—that the Old Testament is to be interpreted in the light of the New, from which it follows that the whole Old Testament law of sacrifice and ritual is after Christ no longer binding on anyone. Although it is not always clear whether a piece of Old Testament moral teaching belongs to the old system of sacrifice and ritual, it is fairly plausible to regard all moral teaching on sexual issues considered only in the Old Testament and not

in the New Testament (e.g. how to deal with unintentional emission of semen and with menstruation) as rules of ritual purity abolished in the New Covenant. A further test for identifying an obligation as in category 4 rather than category 3 is whether the reason given for the obligation (explicitly or implicitly) depends on contingent circumstances which are different for Gentiles or for contemporary humans from what they were for the first recipients of the command. (I don't mean that people's views about the morality of some act have changed, but that the circumstances which were or should have been seen as what made the command binding have changed.)

The core of Christian ethics is the very general teaching of Jesus reported in the Gospels and other New Testament books which (because it is so central to Christian teaching) must be understood in the literal ways which I summarized in Chapter 7. This is his teaching that people should worship God, forgive those who wrong them, and be very generous in their love for all humans. Given that there is a God these are all without doubt good things to do; and most atheists agree whole-heartedly with the goodness of much (though of course not all) of what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. But, as I pointed out, it is unclear whether Jesus was telling us that we are obliged to do these things, or merely that it is good to do them. The Reformers held that 'there are no works of supererogation'; we owe every moment of our lives to God. The Catholic tradition, however, has distinguished among good acts those which are obligatory and those which are supererogatory. We can do for God more than we are obliged to do, and that may lead to us going immediately to Heaven when we die, but mere fulfilment of our obligations may lead to us going directly to Purgatory (and only eventually to Heaven) rather than to Hell. On this dispute, I side with the Catholic tradition. A good God who created free creatures would surely not have the right to put them under moral obligations for every moment of their existence, although he would certainly encourage supererogatory goodness. In virtue of his status as our creator, he is entitled to demand much of us, and he has good reason of type (B) (p. 93) for doing so. The actions of feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, etc. are good actions for humans to do, and God wants us to get into the habit of doing such actions. Some of these actions may be obligatory anyway (in categories 1 and 2); but others may have needed a divine command to raise them to that status, and since the teaching of Jesus and the later church implies that doing some of the latter actions is obligatory for all humans, that puts these obligations

into category 3. The obligations were created by the divine command mediated to us through the teaching of Jesus. But humans may need to do (here or in Purgatory) even more than they are obliged to do in order to become the sort of people who would be happy in Heaven. If so, God commends to us that 'more', through the teaching of Jesus.⁸

What is more problematic, however, is some of the more detailed moral instruction about the ways in which we should lead our personal lives, contained not so much in the Gospels as in the rest of the New Testament and later church tradition. (Since all of it, whether or not it occurs also in the Bible, also occurs in widespread later church teaching, it is not plausible to interpret it in other than a normal way.) In this chapter I shall consider some of this teaching noting that it normally concerns our obligations, but also noting exceptions where it is plausible to suppose that it is merely commending some action as good but not obligatory. For each claim about what is obligatory, I shall consider whether it is plausible to suppose that can be derived from the deposit of faith, whether it constitutes central Christian doctrine (in the sense which I defined in Chapter 8), and whether it can be plausibly attributed to one of my four categories. I shall understand some moral teaching constituting central Christian doctrine in my sense as being compatible with it concerning a category 4 obligation which applied only in ancient society, but does not apply today. Showing the doctrine to be plausibly properly derivable may consist simply of showing that it is part of the deposit of faith, either an item of New Testament teaching or (plausibly) an unwritten tradition of the apostolic church. As I commented above, a doctrine being derived from a highly systematized theory is more typical of theological doctrine than of moral doctrine.

There are statements in the Old Testament about the laws which should govern the state of ancient Israel; but the new Christian community was not, and did not aim to be, a political entity. There is no New Testament teaching or agreed early church teaching about the laws or institutions which Christians should seek to get embodied in any future state over which they had influence. Rather, the New Testament and early church teaching takes for granted the existence of various kinds of government and legal systems, and of wars between countries, and has little to say about which are legitimate or the best. It was

⁸ For references to Protestant and Catholic views on 'works of supererogation' and for discussion of the kind of actions required for salvation, see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 129–33.

concerned almost entirely with how individual Christians should act towards others within the bounds of such systems, and also with how the Church itself should be organized. This limitation of concern is understandable—Christians felt that they could do little to change the Roman Empire, and anyway they suspected that the world itself might come to an end quite soon. Only when Christianity became a legally permitted religion, and soon thereafter the official religion of the Roman Empire, did issues of which governments and wars were just resurface. Nor, of course, is there any New Testament or early church teaching on transplant surgery, or on whether people in a coma should be kept biologically ‘alive’ for years, or on whether we have a duty to conserve animal species. On all of these issues later Christian tradition had to extrapolate principles from the very general principles of moral conduct contained in the New Testament and apply them to the detailed issues.

But while the Bible and early church teaching did have a lot to say explicitly about the morality of various kinds of interpersonal relation, Councils, Popes, and church synods have had little to say about these moral issues for most of Christian history, except to repeat it. In the case of some of these issues, this was because there was no dispute for much of that history about the correctness of some view, while in the case of other issues, it was because the correctness of one view was not regarded as sufficiently important a matter to warrant deeming those who held a minority view to be heretical. I shall consider eleven contentious moral issues about which there has been traditional Christian teaching, but about most of which Christians are much divided today or were much divided in the past. I shall consider how the traditional teaching is to be understood, whether it is plausibly derivable from the deposit of faith, to which (if any) of my four categories it can plausibly be ascribed, and the degree of authority which it possesses. If it is to be plausible to ascribe some teaching to category 3 or 4, it must be plausible to suppose that God would have issued the relevant command. If there would seem to be no point in his doing so, that will have some tendency to make it improbable that he has done so. But if I can give good reason for supposing that such traditional teaching on these issues as can be regarded as central Christian doctrine can be properly derived from the deposit of faith, and either informs us of category 1 or 2 obligations or is such as God would have some other reason to command, that is evidence that the Christian Revelation satisfies the third and fourth tests of a true revelation in these respects. Since the moral teaching which I shall consider constitutes much of what is today the most

controversial Christian moral teaching, that would be strong reason for supposing that Christian moral teaching generally satisfies these two tests. In view of the brevity with which I shall discuss each issue, I must, however, emphasize the tentative nature of the conclusions which I shall be reaching. In particular, some of my judgements claiming that some doctrine is or is not a central Christian doctrine are largely unargued. This is because for doctrines which were never officially defined or the subject of much controversy, but simply taken for granted, whether they were regarded as all-important (on my account of this notion in Chapter 8) turns on whether over a substantial period of time anyone who denied them would have been deemed heretical; and it is often very difficult to assess the truth of such a 'counterfactual' conditional. To substantiate a view about some such issues would require writing a long historical work; hence the largely unargued nature of some of the judgements which I express. But for most of my views on such issues I do give brief arguments. And I believe that most readers will find some of these judgements fairly evident. But if someone does not agree with my judgements on these matters, they will need to amend my overall conclusions accordingly.

SEXUAL ISSUES

I begin with issues of sexual relations, which are issues about which the Bible and church tradition have a lot to say. It is plausible to suppose that it is a category 1 moral principle that people ought to keep the solemn obligations which they have undertaken voluntarily towards each other. So natural reason can show that the married ought to fulfil the obligations to each other which they have undertaken in getting married. But I don't see that natural reason can show that forms of sexual liaison other than marriage are wrong, or that it can show what should be done when a marriage turns out to be far from ideal. Christian teaching on these latter matters requires a divine command; and I shall argue that God has reason to issue the relevant command, and so—given other reason to suppose that the Church received from Jesus Christ a divine revelation—it is probable that traditional Church teaching on these matters is true. In considering biblical teaching on sexual ethics, we must bear in mind that all its teaching springs from the view that sex is a gift from God to secure the stability of the family (centrally husband and wife) as the vehicle for the nurture and education of children. Jesus

himself, in his teaching on the indissolubility of marriage,⁹ apparently referred to relevant passages in Genesis 1 and 2. The phrase used by Jesus 'God made them male and female' seems to refer to the Genesis 1 blessing of God on Adam and Eve containing the words 'Be fruitful and multiply'.¹⁰ And the phrase 'a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' is an explicit quotation from Genesis 2 (pre-dating the story of the Fall).¹¹

I suggest that natural reason can show that the ideal family (i.e. a loving marriage with children) is a good thing. It is obviously good for anyone to have a partner who loves them and whom they love, when both of them regard loyalty and support of the other as a primary lifelong obligation; and who co-operate in begetting, loving, nurturing, and educating children in the right way. The relevant divine commands come in the form of restrictions on the use of the gift of sex to its use within marriage, in order, I shall suggest, to secure the stability of marriage and so of the family. Sex is a gift additional to the gift of life. God might have made us sexless, and made provision for procreation by some natural process within a woman which required no male co-operation. Human gifts often come with restrictions on their use. I may give one of my children some money, saying that they are to use it only for a certain kind of purpose (e.g. to buy clothes, or to buy books, or to buy a house), though not specifying more fully how they are to use it (e.g. which books they should buy). So God has the right to give us sexual organs, saying that they are to be used only within marriage, but without telling us whether we are to marry or whom we are to marry.

I carry out this examination of traditional teaching with respect to eight sexual issues, about six of which biblical passages have fairly clear things to say.

Adultery

Adultery, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman at least one of whom is married to someone else, is condemned by the seventh commandment, the authority of which was reinforced by the teaching of Jesus.¹² That adultery is immoral has always been taken for granted by Christians, but if anyone had sought to deny this, they would surely

⁹ Mark 10: 6–12.

¹⁰ Gen. 1: 27–8.

¹¹ Gen. 2: 24.

¹² Exod. 20: 14; Deut. 5: 18; confirmed by implication in Matt. 5: 27–8 and 19: 18–21, and John 8: 11.

have been deemed heretical by any ecclesial body during many Christian centuries. Since adultery normally¹³ involves a breach of marriage vows without the permission of one's spouse, it is normally a breach of a category 1 moral obligation.

Divorce

Divorce may also be a breach of a category 1 obligation; but this will depend on how the original marriage vow (or the commitment implicitly entered into by the spouses if there is no vow) is understood. The vow may be understood either as a promise merely to the other spouse, or as a promise also to God; and its content may be understood (the 'you' being the other spouse) as 'I vow to be faithful while you want me to be faithful' or 'I vow to be faithful while you are faithful', or (more strongly) as 'I vow to be faithful even if you are not faithful'. But if it is understood merely as a promise to the other spouse, then whatever its content, each spouse could dispense the other from the obligation to keep it; and divorce by mutual consent would always be possible.

The biblical accounts of the teaching of Jesus about divorce all imply a limit to divorce by consent. Mark 10: 10–12 (and Luke 16: 18) seem to constitute an absolute ban on divorce; Matthew 5: 32, commenting on the situation of the husband divorcing the wife (the only kind of divorce permitted by Jewish law), states that the prohibition applies except in the case of 'unchastity' (*πορνεία*, however that is to be interpreted in this context).¹⁴ Paul repeats the absolutist teaching of Mark as the teaching of Jesus ('I give this command, not I but the Lord'¹⁵). But he ('I and not the Lord') qualifies it for the case where a Christian husband or wife has an unbelieving spouse who leaves him or her: 'In such a case the brother or sister is not bound.'¹⁶ It is plausible to regard Paul

¹³ I write 'normally' because it normally involves a breach of a promise to which the other party has not agreed. If a wife is happy for her husband to have other liaisons, or vice versa, then what is wrong with adultery is different. It may still involve wronging one's children to whom one has an obligation to provide a secure home, and to whom one does have an obligation to set an example (which, barring a divine command, one does not have towards the whole human race). And it will be wrong in any case for the same reasons as fornication is wrong, in constituting a breach of a category 3 obligation.

¹⁴ 'Except in the case of *πορνεία*' may mean 'except in the case of adultery', as in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) of Ecclus. 23: 23; but it may mean 'except where the wife has been shown not to be a virgin at her marriage'.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 7: 10–11.

¹⁶ 1. Cor. 7: 15.

as giving a view in the latter passage about how the teaching of Jesus applied to an issue with which he thought that Jesus had not dealt.

The only way in which there can be a limit to divorce by consent is if the vow is thought of as a vow also to God, who lets us know that he will not exempt us from it (except perhaps in the circumstances referred to by St Paul). The content of the vow was understood as 'I vow to be faithful even if you [the other spouse] are not faithful' in the Catholic and (until recently) much of the Protestant tradition, and as 'I vow to be faithful if you are faithful' in the Orthodox tradition—the former (following Mark 10: 10–12) allowing no divorce, the latter (following Matt. 5: 32) allowing divorce on the sole ground of adultery, *πορνεία* being so understood. Although canonists have always exercised much casuistry in determining whether a valid marriage existed in the first place (e.g. in determining whether both spouses had entered voluntarily into the marriage agreement, which was generally supposed to be necessary for a valid marriage), and although Church authorities have often bent the rules in their judgements about particular cases, for many Christian centuries any advocate of divorce by consent would surely have been deemed heretical. The immorality of divorce outside limits of the wide kind allowed by the Orthodox church constitutes, I therefore suggest, a central Christian doctrine. The obligation to enter only into a marriage in which the vow is understood in either the Catholic or the Orthodox ways is hardly a category 1 or 2 obligation; barring a divine command, we don't owe it to anyone to make one sort of vow rather than another. And we should regard the obligation not as a category 3 one, since Jesus seems to allow that it was not binding on Israel before Christ,¹⁷ but as a category 4 obligation binding at least on Christians.

Why should God make divorce difficult or impossible—say, for a Christian wife to divorce a cruel (though not unfaithful) husband? These instructions have never been seen as forbidding a temporary separation in such circumstances,¹⁸ but why should not the Christian wife marry again? I suggest two connected reasons. The first is to ensure great generosity of commitment in the first place—each spouse is giving the other him or her self for life, without the possibility of getting out of the marriage if they don't like it; the understanding of the vow in one or other of the traditional ways will mean that the marriage will start on the right foot. And the second reason is that such an understanding of

¹⁷ Mark 10: 3–6.

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 7: 11 seems to give tacit approval to this.

the vow will have the consequence that even if one spouse is not a good spouse, the other party will have an obligation by his or her example of steadfastness to encourage both the former spouse and others beyond the marriage to be good spouses in future. These are reasons of kind (B) (p. 93); reasons why God, seeking the holiness of the potentially divorcing couple, and the good of others beyond the couple, might make obligatory on the couple what would otherwise be supererogatory (with qualifications for the circumstances discussed by St Paul).

Fornication

I understand by fornication any sexual intercourse outside marriage. St Paul condemns *πορνεία*, and although some of the relevant passages in his letters are compatible with a translation of this as denoting a particular kind of sexual intercourse outside marriage (e.g. with a prostitute), not all of them are. 1 Corinthians 7: 1–2 condemns all heterosexual intercourse outside marriage, and for nineteen centuries church tradition has been unanimous in echoing that condemnation. And again, despite the frequency with which church authorities refused to condemn individuals who had intercourse outside marriage, surely anyone who denied the immorality of such behaviour would have been deemed heretical; hence I suggest that the immorality of fornication is a central Christian doctrine. Natural reason, however, cannot, I think, show that fornication is wrong. For obligations are to someone, and to which human is there an obligation on the unmarried not to have sexual intercourse?¹⁹ But there are reasons why it is supererogatorily good not to do so. To abstain from intercourse outside marriage will make the intimacy of marriage special, and so make husband and wife unique partners for each other. Someone who has saved the satisfaction of sexual desire for a spouse will be able to regard and be regarded by that spouse

¹⁹ In *De Malo* (trans. R. Regan (Oxford University Press, 2003)), Aquinas considers (15. 2, obj. 4) the objection to the claim that fornication is immoral, that 'Fornication is neither contrary to the love of God, since it is not a sin against God, nor contrary to love of neighbour, since it inflicts no injury on one's neighbour'. But, contrary to the objection, he then goes on (ad 4) to claim that it is 'contrary to the good of begetting and rearing children'. He makes the point (less forceful in these days of ready contraception, but still with force) that such fornication is liable to lead to a child being brought up by a single parent, the mother; and that children need a father (ibid. 15. 1; see also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3. 122). He comments elsewhere that 'In sins contrary to nature, in which the very order of nature is violated, an injury is done to God, the ordainer of nature' (*Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 2ae. 154. 12 ad 1).

as uniquely their own. And it is highly plausible to suppose that if people get used to having casual sex before marriage, it becomes very natural to commit adultery when the marriage becomes difficult or boring; and also that the example of many people abstaining from sexual intercourse before marriage will influence others also to take their marriages more seriously. So God has reasons again of the kind (B) to make his gift of sex come with the command to confine heterosexual intercourse to intercourse within marriage. I am uncertain whether to understand the command as imposing a category 3 or a category 4 obligation.

Homosexual Acts

Various biblical texts forbid performing homosexual acts; Romans 1: 24–7 does so very clearly, and so fairly clearly does 1 Corinthians 6: 9–10.²⁰ These take up Old Testament prohibitions—Leviticus 18: 22 and Deuteronomy 23: 17–18. Nineteen centuries of unanimous church tradition supports this prohibition, and denying it would surely have been deemed heretical. So again I suggest that it must count as a central Christian doctrine. But why should God forbid those whose sexual affections are permanently fixed on others of the same sex from having an intimate relationship analogous to marriage?

The first thing to recognize is that homosexuality is a disability.²¹ For a homosexual is unable to enter into a loving relationship in which the love is as such procreative. It is a great blessing, the normal human condition important for the continuance of our race, to have children which are the fruit of loving acts of parents towards each other.

²⁰ That these verses do condemn all homosexual sexual actions is acknowledged even by many Christian thinkers who consider that the Church should not condemn these. See e.g. D. O. Via, in D. O. Via and R. A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible* (Fortress Press, 2003), 11–14.

²¹ And a disability perhaps naturally called (despite the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 contrary view) a disease. A recent philosophical analysis of the concept of disease produced the plausible analysis that a disease was (1) a state of affairs bad for the individual concerned, which (2) he was unlucky to have, and (3) was in principle curable medically (e.g. did not consist in being poor or persecuted). See Rachel Cooper, 'Disease,' *Studies in the History and Philosophy of the Biological and Medical Sciences*, 33b (2002), 263–82. But since she considers that paedophilia is not bad for the paedophile if he is happy with his condition (and which in that case could not—she considers—be a disease), she would presumably say the same of homosexuality. This is a somewhat unnatural account of the normal concept of disease, which seems to be that of a medical condition the status of which is independent of whether the diseased person likes being in that condition or not. The 'bad' in her definition should be read in an objective sense; a person's condition can be bad for that person, even if they do not recognize it as such.

Children need two parents of different kinds (biological, emotional and mental), so that they have different examples of behaviour to emulate, with each of whom the child can identify in virtue of sharing some of their nature, on whose different kinds of support they can rely, and which ideally serve as examples of loving co-operation despite diversity. While not everyone may choose to become parents of this kind, the inability to do so is a disability.

Perhaps some complicated operation can be performed whereby the genetic material of each of two men or each of two women is put into a cell and the cell inserted into a womb, which would then develop into an embryo in the normal way. But this is a poor substitute for the normal means of procreation—for several reasons. First, of course, the resulting pregnancy would not be the result of a loving act of the parents. It would as such have nothing to do with any such act. Secondly, if two men were involved, they would need to use the egg of a woman which would contain some genetically influential matter, and also to hire a womb and allow a woman to give birth to a child which they would then take away from her. Or if two women were involved, the embryo could not contain a Y-chromosome, and so only a female offspring would be possible. Not merely would the parents be of a similar kind, but children would be of the same similar kind.

Disabilities need to be prevented and cured, so we need first to discover their cause. What causes homosexuality? The consensus of the scientific community is that both genetic constitution and social factors interact to produce homosexuality. The social factors may include Freudian-type factors (over-involved mother and cold father causing male homosexuality, etc.) and the absence of gender-specific education and dress; but they will also surely include the acceptability of homosexual practice among peers and society more widely.²² Since all other desires to behave in a certain way are influenced at least in part by the behaviour of other people it would be very odd indeed if homosexual desire was the unique exception. And in the case of a co-operative activity such as homosexual practice, the social influences must include as a dominant influence solicitation by someone else. Since homosexual acts necessarily involve a partner, one person must provide encouragement (i.e. explicit or implicit solicitation) to another person to commit such an act before the act can take place. Someone with the slightest inclination to

²² See Additional Note F on the present state of scientific research on the causes of homosexual inclination and on the desirability of having an involved parent of each sex.

commit such an act, or simply the desire to please, is far more likely to commit it than is someone solicited to have normal sexual intercourse; for even in these days of ready contraception, there is a risk of a serious result from the latter—pregnancy, to which there is no parallel in the homosexual activity. Practice will inevitably often strengthen desire. And even if it doesn't, and the person involved reverts to the heterosexual condition, it will have made a resultant normal marriage less special.

In view of the high probability that both the general climate and solicitation encourage homosexual desire, and in the absence of further information about its causes, we should seek to prevent the spread of homosexual desire by seeking to change the general climate of approving the practice and by seeking to deter solicitation, as well as by promoting scientific research into how genetic or other biological intervention can change sexual desire. And what about cure? One thing which the past century's medical advances have taught us is surely that no disease (or deficiency) is beyond the possibility of cure; and it would again be quite extraordinary if homosexuality was the unique exception to this. In adolescence and thereafter, many people have mixed sexual desires, and encouraging heterosexual desire and discouraging homosexual desire by example and by therapy must be a serious possibility, even if we have not yet discovered the right kind of therapy. But one must acknowledge that there is only the slightest possibility of cure in 2007 for many adult homosexuals.²³

So part of both prevention and cure (where that is now possible) must consist in deterring homosexuals from committing homosexual acts. Homosexuals can help to prevent the spread of homosexuality and help to cure others by setting an example of not indulging their inclinations and of seeking a cure. In this way even those whose homosexual inclinations are almost impossible to alter at present can encourage those whose homosexual desires are not so firmly fixed to seek a cure which they might then more readily obtain. Above all, the former group can refrain from soliciting (even implicitly), for they cannot know that those whom they solicit have homosexual desires which are beyond strengthening or weakening.

I suggest that there is a category 1 obligation on everyone not to strengthen anyone else's homosexual desires and so, fairly evidently, not to solicit anyone (e.g. any adolescent) whose homosexual desires are not

²³ On this see also Additional Note F.

firmly fixed. But, I suggest further, that (barring a divine command) it is supererogatorily good for any homosexual to take steps to prevent and cure his state, and so not to indulge his homosexual desires in any way, but rather, actively to encourage others to seek a cure. Hence God has reason again of the second kind (B) to make it obligatory on everyone not to commit homosexual acts. Nevertheless, if—in my view, very improbably—it was shown very probable that no one is influenced in their sexual desires by the behaviour of others, this argument would of course fail. Then there would be a case for regarding Church teaching on homosexuality either as a unique exception to the truth of central Christian doctrines, or as substantial evidence against there having been a revelation from God through Jesus Christ.

There is much in the New Testament, and especially in the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, about our duty to show love and compassion for others; and many have argued that such teaching requires us to reject the traditional Christian view. But loving someone does not always involve encouraging them to do what they desire to do; love for others should also have a concern that those others live good and generous lives, and (if possible) in the course of time come to form the best desires. It is hard for anyone to have to restrain their deepest impulses, but it would be widely agreed that many people other than homosexuals need to do so—both when the fulfilment of those desires involves no direct harm to anyone else (as is the case with desires for heroin, or limb amputation) and when their fulfilment does involve others who agree to such involvement (as with desires for brother–sister incest or even heterosexual desires for 11-year-old children). We saw earlier that the Christian limitations on divorce also put many others in this position. Our love and God's love for the person with a frustrated desire, whether or not having the desire is the result of his or her own choice, will not—I suggest—always lead God, and should not always lead us, to encourage them to indulge their desire. It should rather lead us to seek the very best for them, and that may involve persuading them to seek a cure for the frustrated desire, but in any case encouraging them to undertake the good task of helping others towards a cure by not living the sort of life which will encourage the spread and worsening of a disability. So I do not see that the Christian understanding of God's love in any way forces us to restrict the natural scope of the biblical prohibition. Romans 1: 24–7 sees homosexual behaviour as a Gentile sin, and so the biblical prohibition must be thought of as of universal application imposing a category 3 obligation.

Family Headship

‘Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord’, wrote the author of the Letter to the Ephesians.²⁴ Nineteen centuries of unanimous Church tradition has affirmed that the husband is the head of the family, centred on husband and wife who should feed and educate their children. And again, denying it would surely have been deemed heretical; it must constitute central Christian doctrine. Clearly, any institution needs a system for resolving differences about how the institution should act. Some sort of ‘majority vote’ system is used by many institutions. But of course that is of no use in a two-member organization, such as marriage. Clearly too, the married couple ought to seek agreement on matters central to the institution if they can—on where they should live, how their children should be educated, and so on. But if they can’t reach agreement, one of them must have a casting vote; or someone outside the marriage (an adjudicator whom both spouses before the marriage agree should have this role) must have the authority to decide the disputed issue. Otherwise the marriage will not last. I can’t see any necessary moral truth about which arrangement would be best. The outside adjudicator would not know all the inside details of the marriage, might die, lose touch with the couple or lose their confidence, and his or her very existence might prevent the couple facing up to the need to try as hard as possible to sort things out between themselves; it would diminish the independence of the married unit. But of course the adjudicator arrangement would have the advantage that no spouse would be in a position to consider that having a casting vote involved greater moral superiority or wisdom—a false belief which might lead to one spouse not paying serious attention to the other’s views. I can’t see any necessary truth about which arrangement would be best; or, if one of the spouses is to have the casting vote, which of them—husband or wife—it should be. The arrangement is something appropriately laid down by the creator of all humans, just as driving on the left (in Britain) is something appropriately laid down by the state which owns the roads. If God has laid down that a husband should have the casting vote, this obligation should be regarded as a category 3 one, for clearly all peoples need a principle for resolving marital disagreement. (Genesis seems to regard it as binding on all peoples, since God is said to have issued it before Israel

²⁴ Eph. 5: 22. See also Col. 3: 18; 1 Pet. 3: 1; Titus 2: 5.

began to exist²⁵). God has a co-ordination reason—that is, a reason of kind (A), for issuing the relevant command. St Paul sees this obligation as balanced by an obligation on the husband restricting the exercise of such authority to the absolute minimum: ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up for her.’²⁶ ‘And of course no husband has the right to decide on a course of action which is morally wrong (e.g. one which he had promised before the marriage not to follow). Genesis sees the family headship obligation as a consequence of the Fall; and perhaps it is an obligation which hurts only because husbands and wives suffer from the conflicting selfish desires of fallen humanity. If we were holier people, it would not be such a burden.

I conclude with respect to these five issues on which biblical teaching and church tradition express a clear view, that that view constitutes central Christian doctrine, is morally plausible (because either it expresses a category 1 or 2 obligation, or it is plausible to suppose that God would have issued the relevant command for another reason), and so—given other reasons to believe the basic structure of the Christian doctrinal system—this moral teaching is probably binding at least on all Christians always. I contrast these issues with a connected issue on which St Paul gives teaching, which I conclude that we cannot (by my general principles) regard as binding on Christians today or for much of Christian history.

Long Hair, and Wearing Hats in Church

Paul writes that women should wear long hair and have their heads covered while prophesying or praying (presumably in church), and that men should have short hair and heads uncovered.²⁷ One way in which he phrases the point of this is that man was not ‘created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.’ But then he seems to backtrack: ‘Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman.’ Perhaps we can phrase his theological justification of his recommended practice as something like this: God gives man the headship of a household, but should not exercise any more authority than is absolutely necessary; each needs the other, and should show abundant love to the other. I have just defended this view. But in a later part of the same passage Paul seems to acknowledge that some Christians

²⁵ Gen. 3: 16.

²⁶ Eph. 5: 25. See also 1 Pet. 3: 7.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 11: 3–16.

might disagree with him about this matter: 'If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we have no such custom [as men wearing long hair and women short hair, etc.], nor do the churches of God.' Although he does not actually write 'I and not the Lord' am telling you this, and it is only good advice, he does seem to imply this; and he does not say 'the Lord and not I', or 'I have received [this] from the Lord'. Furthermore, church tradition has been far from unanimous in following this practice. For many centuries Orthodox monks have had long hair and have had their heads covered for certain parts of church worship. For these reasons, we cannot regard this teaching as central Christian teaching.

If Paul's instruction is a command, as opposed to a commendation, the resulting obligation can only be regarded as having force as long as long hair and hats symbolize the role of male headship of the family. Nowadays (at least in most societies) they don't, and so we must regard the instruction as conveying at most a category 4 moral truth applicable only to past Christians in the Mediterranean world, but now defunct. Since the grounds for the instruction no longer hold (covered heads and length of hair no longer carrying the symbolism which Paul assumes), the male/female distinction must be expressed by whatever expresses the original point in contemporary symbolism. When the meaning of a symbol changes (such as the meaning of a word in an English translation of the Bible), you must replace it by a symbol which carries the original meaning. I doubt if any symbol of dress today carries Paul's meaning, but Paul's command does at least suggest that men and women ought to dress differently (a custom encouraged anyway by both anatomy and aesthetics), which will bring out that they have somewhat different roles in society. Deuteronomy contains the more general instruction, which is clearly a command: 'A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment.'²⁸

I turn now to two connected issues about which (probably) the Bible has nothing to say, but Church tradition has had a firm and virtually unanimous view.

Contraception

Although, in my view, the Bible expresses no view about the morality of the temporary use of contraception within marriage,²⁹ all contraception

²⁸ Deut. 22: 5.

²⁹ Gen. 38: 8–10 is sometimes cited as a condemnation of contraception. Onan was meant to 'raise up offspring' by his dead brother's wife, but 'since Onan knew that

was condemned with virtual unanimity by those Fathers and scholastics who expressed a view. Their justification for this condemnation must therefore lie in its derivability from 'unwritten tradition'. That has some plausibility, because as soon as contraception is mentioned in Christian writing in the third century, it is mentioned only to be condemned³⁰. If anyone in the high Middle Ages had argued that some use of contraception within marriage in order to space children (e.g. on grounds of parents being unable to afford to have six children) was permissible, would this have been regarded as heretical? Probably yes, but I am not confident that if some theologian had claimed that contraception was permissible in cases where 'unprotected' intercourse or pregnancy could lead to serious illness or death of baby or mother, he would have been deemed heretical. For this possibility was only highlighted by the aids epidemic and some modern discoveries. So I am inclined to think of a total prohibition on contraception as a borderline case for a central Christian doctrine.

It is not plausible to regard the obligation not to practice contraception as a category 1 or 2 obligation. No one is wronged thereby—it does not involve the killing of a human; rather, it prevents the existence of one more human, but not of any particular human. For there is no reason to suppose that before there is a fertilized embryo (and, I shall argue below, probably not until well after that) has God (or chance) predetermined who that will be (i.e. predetermined which soul will be united with that embryo. The mere fact of a union of a particular egg from my mother with a particular sperm from my father was insufficient to ensure that I would be conceived³¹). The argument in the 'natural law' tradition (see pp. 89–90) to which Aquinas and so many later theologians appealed, that contraception involved a 'sin against nature', is totally inadequate to show that contraception is immoral. For even if it is more 'natural' to have intercourse without contraception (as animals do), that does not

the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went into his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death.' But what is being condemned here is not any occasional spilling of semen, but the total refusal to raise offspring by what was in effect his wife.

³⁰ See the definitive work on the attitude of the Catholic church to contraception: J. T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Harvard University Press, 1965; New American Library, 1967).

³¹ For fuller argument that who one is, is not determined by the make-up or origin of one's body, see my *The Evolution of The Soul*, rev. edn. (Clarendon Press, 1997), Part 2.

entail that it is bad, let alone wrong, to use it.³² Only a divine command could create the obligation not to use it.

If one holds, as many of the Fathers and scholastics seem to have held, that procreation was the sole divinely ordained purpose of sexual intercourse, then it immediately follows that contraception is an abuse—for it is using the divine gift of sex for a purpose contrary to the donor's wishes. But many of the Fathers and scholastics held that there were also other good purposes of marriage. Augustine, who might have been expected to hold otherwise, wrote: 'All these are why marriage is good: offspring (*proles*), fidelity (*fides*), and stability (*sacramentum*).' Fidelity is 'sustaining each other's weakness for the avoidance of illicit intercourse'.³³ Many of the Fathers agreed that having intercourse within marriage in order to avoid succumbing to the temptation of having intercourse outside marriage was a good purpose of marriage. But it does seem a rather low-grade good purpose. Augustine's third purpose, *sacramentum*, which Noonan translates as 'symbolic stability', is not, as Augustine explains it, connected to sexual intercourse; it means perhaps unbreakable companionship in other valuable activities. There is, however, quite a lot in the Bible which understands sexual intercourse as a cement for that companionship which is good in itself. While in the Genesis 1 commendation of marriage, God said to Adam and Eve, 'Be fruitful and multiply', the Genesis 2 account of the origin of marriage is that God instituted it to provide a helper and partner for man—man and wife 'become one flesh'; and Jesus himself cited the Genesis 2 words 'one flesh'. Christ's relation to the Church is compared several times in the New Testament to that of bridegroom to bride; so the latter relation is clearly seen as an intrinsic good. The New Testament authors, sometimes citing Christ's own words for the comparison, could hardly think that unless they also thought that sexual intercourse is an intrinsic good—especially as the analogy seems to leave no place for offspring; the disciples are represented as wedding-guests, not as offspring, in the three Gospel passages³⁴ where Christ is described as the Bridegroom. The Letter to the Ephesians³⁵ dwells at length on this analogy, stressing

³² For Aquinas's and similar arguments, see Noonan, *Contraception*. The other argument given by some Fathers and scholastics was the argument that contraception is a form of homicide—which, I have claimed, it clearly is not. On this argument and some opposition to it, see Noonan, *Contraception*, 282–9.

³³ St Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 29. 32 and 6. For commentary on this passage of Augustine, see Noonan, *Contraception*, 160–75.

³⁴ Mark 2: 19–20; Matt. 25: 1–13; John 3: 29.

³⁵ Eph. 5: 28.

the value of fleshly unity ('Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies'), without mentioning procreation. And St Paul's recommendation to the married that they should not deprive each other of sexual intercourse seems to treat intercourse as a good in itself (i.e. by its nature cementing the union of husband and wife) or at any rate as good for the avoidance of temptation, without mentioning the good of procreation.³⁶ Quite a bit of the patristic and scholastic traditions allowed that it is morally permissible for the married to have intercourse even if they are unable to procreate. Chrysostom, for example, wrote that there was nothing wrong with those too old to have children having intercourse.³⁷

But once it is acknowledged that marriage has purposes other than procreation, the issue arises as to whether it might be legitimate to have intercourse in order to fulfil the other purposes when procreation would not be a good thing. That procreation was sometimes not a good thing was often acknowledged. 'Lactantius speaks of a Christian who is too poor to raise a large family. The only solution for such a man is absolute continence.'³⁸ It became recognized more generally in the sixteenth century that there might be various reasons of a socio-economic kind, including the welfare of existing children, permitting a wife to refuse intercourse.³⁹ So, given that there are other good purposes for intercourse, why should it be forbidden to have intercourse while taking steps to avoid procreation? No clear answer was ever given. Any full account of this must explain why procreation is a good thing. And there is of course one obvious answer: human beings are good; procreation adds to their number. I quoted the Genesis pre-Fall divine command to Adam and Eve, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.' And if more humans are a good thing, it must be especially good for there to be more humans who will be educated as Christians, and so for Christians to propagate. Strangely, the Fathers seldom gave this (or any other) argument for the goodness of procreation. One who did give this argument was St Ambrose, who wrote that the Church should rejoice in generation, because 'the number of the devout people is increased'.⁴⁰ And this, surely, is plausible. God has given many humans a task of continuing and increasing the human race; those who marry accept the obligation to contribute to this work as a primary task in their lives. If

³⁶ 1 Cor. 7: 3–5.

³⁷ Noonan, *Contraception*, 104.

³⁸ See *ibid.* 123.

³⁹ See e.g. *ibid.* 396–403. It was recognized in the Middle Ages that poverty extenuates, though does not justify, the use of contraception and even the practice of abortion (*ibid.* 199).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 108.

the goodness of more humans on earth is the reason why procreation is good (and it is hard to think that any other answer is possible), then there is a reason for God to forbid contraception in the early centuries AD, but one which would not apply in the twenty-first century. The reason is that not merely (now as well as then) would contraception deprive God of the good of more humans, the task of producing which he has entrusted to us; but that if contraception had been generally permitted, there could be a danger that the human race would have become much reduced and possibly extinct, and so a reason (a kind B reason) for God to prohibit contraception⁴¹.

Two millennia ago, such was the prevalence of disease that most pregnancies did not yield babies who survived to become adults, and intercourse being generally practised without contraception ensured that the world remained populated. Plausibly the Earth is now fully populated, while at any rate in the developed world most pregnancies (which have lasted a few months) do lead to babies who survive to adulthood. The divine command to 'fill the earth' has been fulfilled. Tertullian, Jerome, and Chrysostom all thought the Earth overpopulated in their own days.⁴² Little did they realize what real overpopulation is like! One may argue that there is a need now to stabilize the population, in order there may be food and space enough for all, as well as for the sake of the environment. Accepting this would make the obligation never to use contraception merely a category 4 obligation, binding only on humans of past centuries. The new circumstances (that without contraception the population would become too large to have adequate food and space) outweigh the good of having more people which constituted the grounds of the previous obligation, and permit its use to space children.

I claimed above that it is plausible to suppose that the prohibition of contraception is properly derivable from an unwritten tradition. I do, however, have doubts about whether there was such unwritten tradition, for the following reasons. There are no clear condemnations of contraception before the third century, and relatively little discussion of the morality thereof even in the fourth century.⁴³ Some of the later

⁴¹ In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3. 122. 4–5, Aquinas does give as a reason for the prohibition of contraception that this prohibition is needed for the propagation of the species. However, there are no clear condemnations of contraception before the third century, and relatively little discussion of the morality thereof even in the fourth century. See Noonan, *Contraception*, 122–3.

⁴² Noonan, *Contraception*, 109–10.

⁴³ Noonan, *Contraception*, 122–3.

Jewish traditions which developed independently of the Christian tradition seemed to have allowed contraception in certain circumstances,⁴⁴ suggesting that some Jewish traditions might well have had a similar attitude in New Testament times. In that case Christian rejection of the practice at that time might well be expected to have given rise to controversy reflected in the New Testament or in second-century literature. All that, combined with the very positive attitude of the New Testament (described above) towards the 'fleshly' element of marriage, raises considerable doubt about whether there was an unwritten tradition of a prohibition on contraception in the apostolic church. Nevertheless, the claim that there was such an unwritten tradition has sufficient probability for it to be plausible (i.e. to some extent probable) to suppose that the prohibition can be derived from the deposit of faith; and so (in view of the other evidence for the Church's authority) the Church's teaching this doctrine as all-important is evidence that it is properly derivable. Hence, if the prohibition is a central Christian doctrine (possibly subject to qualification in cases where pregnancy could lead to serious illness or death), since there are good reasons for God issuing such a prohibition to earlier centuries, this item of its moral teaching does not count against the truth of the Christian Revelation. But if the prohibition is not a central Christian doctrine, I doubt whether it is a revealed Christian doctrine at all.

Abortion

Whether the Bible contains any prohibition of abortion depends on how various texts are interpreted. Exodus 21: 22 concerns the situation of a pregnant woman being injured by accident when people are fighting, and in consequence miscarrying; in such a situation the Hebrew text asserts that the person responsible is to be fined, but if the consequence is the death of the mother, then 'life is given for life'. The Septuagint (the Greek translation), however, asserts that 'life is given for life' if the embryo is formed; in other words there is a serious penalty for the abortion of a 'formed' embryo. Philo⁴⁵ noted that by implication intentional as well as accidental abortion is condemned. The condemnations of *φαρμακεία* (the practice of giving drugs) in Galatians 5: 21, *φαρμακία* (drugs) in Revelation 9: 21, and *φαρμακοί* (those who administer drugs) in Revelation 21: 8 and 22: 15 may well

⁴⁴ Noonan, *Contraception*, 70–7.

⁴⁵ Philo, *The Special Laws*, 3. 20. 110.

have abortifacients in mind. From the earliest Fathers onwards, until the twentieth century, there is unanimous condemnation of abortion (except to save the life of the mother), and in this case no good reason to deny its derivability from an unwritten apostolic tradition.⁴⁶ To my mind, any medieval advocate of practising it for a much wider class of reasons (e.g. social reasons) would undoubtedly have been deemed heretical. Hence the obligation not to procure an abortion (except to save the mother's life) is a central Christian doctrine.

The obligation not to kill (except in the circumstances mentioned above) is, as I have already noted, fairly clearly a category 2 obligation. So when does the foetus become a human? What we value about being alive depends on having a conscious life. If I came to believe that I would cease to be conscious at the age of 60, but that, if duly fed and cared for, my body would continue to function normally for another twenty years, I would judge that there would be no point in the latter process—for I would not still exist. Analogously, at the other end of life, once I begin to be conscious in however primitive a way, I exist; and the conscious life of a person who exists at this stage is—we have every reason to believe—the life of the same person as will have in due course (barring destruction of the foetus or the subsequent fully human body) a far less primitive conscious life. To abort the foetus would then be to kill someone who could thereafter have a full conscious life. There is, however, no evidence that before that first glimmer of consciousness it is predetermined who a given foetus will be (i.e. which soul will be associated with a given foetus); it is in no way improbable that, instead of the soul which did become associated with that foetus, quite another soul could have done so. Hence to abort the early foetus would not be to end the existence of a particular person. So I conclude that it is reasonable to suppose (in the absence of any further evidence) that only when there is first a conscious life, will abortion constitute the ending of the life of a particular person, and so constitute murder.⁴⁷ Abortion of a foetus

⁴⁶ The earliest Christian condemnation of abortion is to be found in *The Letter of Barnabas* (19. 5), a work dated by most scholars to the first half of the second century. Hence there is better evidence that it derives from an unwritten apostolic tradition than there is for the condemnation of contraception.

⁴⁷ The Aristotelian distinction, adumbrated in the Septuagint of Exod. 21: 22, between the abortion of a formed foetus and the abortion of an unformed foetus was utilized at different periods of Christian thought. Aristotle seems to have considered that the foetus went through vegetative and animal stages (in his terminology, had nutritive and sensitive souls) before it became human. The vegetative state lasted for seven days, and the animal state for forty days in the case of a male and ninety days in the case

which has been conscious constitutes a breach of a category 2 obligation. When does consciousness begin? We don't know. But there is substantial reason to believe that a foetus is conscious only when it evinces the same kind of electrical rhythms as are characteristic of consciousness after birth—maybe as late as twenty weeks after conception, or maybe earlier.

Before the foetus becomes a human being, killing it (with the agreement of the parents) would wrong no one. So is there any reason why God would have forbidden it apart from any reason he might have for forbidding contraception? There is the difference that at this stage there is an identifiable individual body being formed, ready to be inhabited by a soul; whereas before conception there is no one body being prepared for ensoulment. It is immensely plausible to suppose, with all Christian tradition, that there is only one divinely ordained purpose for the existence of a foetus—the production of a new human being. There are other purposes besides procreation, I claimed earlier and as Christian tradition—surely correctly—acknowledges, for sexual intercourse—in particular, cementing the union of husband and wife. To use contraception would not make intercourse pointless—far from it, it might help it to achieve the increased love of husband and wife if there is not the 'risk' of a new pregnancy. But to procure an abortion would be terminating a process which has only one divinely instituted purpose. To frustrate this divine purpose might sometimes promote a good (e.g. the good of the survival and happiness of other children of the marriage), just as inhibiting intercourse also sometimes promotes a good. But aborting a foetus is open to the accusation of doing evil in order that good may ensue in a way that contraception is not. Fulfilment of the other good purposes of intercourse is not a consequence of inhibiting procreation; they will be fulfilled anyway. But in the case of abortion the frustration of the only purpose for the existence of the foetus is necessary for the attainment of any other good. So God might well forbid abortion because it frustrates the arrangements he has made for bringing into existence a new embodied human being. The goodness of our facilitating the existence of future humans constitutes a reason

of a female. Aquinas made similar claims: 'The intellectual [i.e. human] soul is created by God at the completion of man's coming into being' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 118. 2 ad 2). It must follow that only at a stage of development later than conception would abortion constitute homicide. The Christian Fathers did not think that this distinction mattered much, but in the Middle Ages it did acquire the significance that late abortion was regarded as a worse sin than early abortion. For details see J. T. Noonan, 'An Almost Absolute Value in History', in J. T. Noonan (ed.), *The Morality of Abortion* (Harvard University Press, 1970), 11–34.

of kind B for God to forbid early abortions. So it is plausible to regard abortion of a foetus in the early stage of pregnancy as a breach of a category 3 obligation (there being no good reason to suppose that the obligation not to do so is confined to certain groups); and —to repeat— a later stage abortion is a breach of a category 2 obligation. So it is plausible to regard all abortion as wrong.

WOMEN PRIESTS

I turn now to an issue of gender, rather than of sex, controversial in the modern church, about which the Bible and church tradition seem to have a firm view. The early church may well have had different structures of authority in different communities, and it took a century or so for the threefold order of ministry—bishops, priests, and deacons—to crystallize out. There are biblical passages, possibly confirmed by Christ's actions and early church tradition, forbidding significant authority in the church to women. In 1 Corinthians 4: 34 Paul writes that 'women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate as the law also says ... It is shameful for a woman to speak in church'; and in 1 Timothy 2: 12 the author writes, 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She is to keep silent.' The second sentence is clearly to be read as a restriction on the first, on the teaching authority of women. It and the previous citation cannot be read as a general requirement on women to keep silent in church, since (as mentioned earlier) 1 Corinthians 11: 5 laid down how a woman who prays or prophesies should be dressed, and this probably refers to public prayer or prophecy (since 'prophecy' by its nature seems to be a public act). The words 'I permit' might seem to be reporting a local prohibition, the author's own action for whatever reason, and not a purported divine requirement. But that interpretation cannot be correct, since the author grounds the requirement in a purported deep fact about creation (that Adam was created first, and that Eve, and not Adam, 'was deceived'). Yet Paul (or the authors of letters attributed to him), and the early church generally, clearly recognized women as having a role in the official structure, including a role in teaching both other women and individual men.⁴⁸ The most natural interpretation

⁴⁸ Titus 2: 3–5 says that older women are to teach younger women. Acts 18: 26 records that Priscilla (mentioned first) and her husband Aquila explained to Apollos

of these New Testament letters is that women should not lead the discussion in any church or be official interpreters of the Gospel; that is, in modern terms, they could not be priests or bishops, but they could exercise a ministry equivalent in modern terms to that of a deacon.

There is also the fact that Christ appointed no woman among the twelve apostles, the original church leaders. He appointed no Gentile either, but of course Gentiles soon became church leaders. So why should not the same happen to women? There seems to me a reason why he did not appoint a Gentile among the twelve. He saw his own mission as a mission only to Israel—‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’⁴⁹ But after his Resurrection Jesus is depicted as commissioning his apostles to be ‘my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the end of the Earth’.⁵⁰ My explanation of the attitude of Jesus to the Gentiles is that Jesus saw the old Israel as having the task of converting the Gentiles to the Gospel which he was preaching to Israel; and he originally commissioned the twelve to lead the old Israel in this task. When the old Israel failed to acknowledge his Gospel, and so this task, the leaders whom he had chosen from the old Israel came to see their task as themselves becoming leaders of a new world-wide church;⁵¹ but because of Jesus’s original conception of his mission, they were initially all Jews. When the mission changed, Gentiles also became church leaders. This explanation of why Gentiles became church leaders provides no analogous reason as to why women should become leaders. All of this makes it plausible to suppose that it is properly derivable from the deposit of faith that women may not become church leaders, which today means priests or bishops.

‘the way of God more accurately’. And various women clearly served the Church in various capacities. Phoebe is described as a ‘deacon of the church at Cenchreae’ (Rom. 16: 3). There is a verse that reads ‘Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things’ (1 Tim. 3: 11) in the middle of a section of 1 Timothy devoted to the qualifications required of deacons. Andronicus and Junia are described as ‘prominent among the apostles’ (Rom. 16: 7). We do not know how Paul understood ‘deacons’. Elsewhere he uses the word in what seems a very general sense of someone who does useful work (Col. 1: 7 and 4: 7); only in 1 Timothy (probably not written by Paul) is being a deacon holding a definite office (3: 8, 10, and 12–13). ‘Apostle’ is used by St Paul to refer both to one of the original twelve apostles and to himself, the original church leaders commissioned by Christ, but also to designate lesser emissaries of churches who were helping to proclaim the Gospel (2 Cor. 8: 23; Phil. 2: 25). The reference to Junia in the middle of a long list of many different people, all of one city to whom Paul sent greetings, suggests that she belongs to the latter group.

⁴⁹ Matt. 15: 4.

⁵⁰ Acts 1: 8.

⁵¹ See my *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003), 130–2.

There is evidence, however, that at certain places women were occasionally ordained as priests (*πρεσβύτεροι*) in the fourth to eighth centuries, notably in southern Italy and Celtic Britain.⁵² But there was no recognition by Church Councils or influential sees of the status of such ordinations, but rather condemnation of such practice.⁵³ And there is no evidence of women bishops.⁵⁴ But it is important to note that although the occasional ordinations of women to the priesthood were condemned, the view that women could be thus ordained was not at the same time condemned as heretical. This inclines me to think that for most Christian centuries if anyone in any ecclesial body plausibly satisfying my two criteria for being part of the Church had taught that women could be ordained to the priesthood, they would not have been condemned as heretical. So I am inclined to doubt whether the non-ordainability of women to the priesthood is a central Christian doctrine. But maybe their non-ordainability to the episcopate could be so regarded. On the other hand, there were undoubtedly very many women deacons officially recognized by councils, including the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon⁵⁵ during the first Christian millennium. It has been disputed whether their ministry was really a 'lay' ministry, or whether they were really in holy orders. It seems fairly clear that at least the Eastern church regarded them as having holy orders.⁵⁶ No ban on ordination of women to the diaconate can be regarded as a properly derivable doctrine, let alone a central Christian doctrine.

But if the non-ordainability of women to the priesthood is a properly derivable doctrine, even if not a central Christian doctrine, it is clearly

⁵² On these points, see J. Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001), 134; and U. E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity* (a Michael Glazier book) (Liturgical Press, 2000), 121–3.

⁵³ Pope Gelasius wrote a letter in 494 to the southern provinces of Italy condemning the ordination of women; the Synod of Laodicea, a fourth-century synod in Asia Minor, ordered that women priests not be installed.

⁵⁴ The fact that occasionally women are referred to (e.g. on inscriptions) as *episcopa* or *πρεσβυτέρα* would seem to me to show little in the absence of further information about these women. As now, where the official title of a priest's wife in the Greek Orthodox church is *πρεσβυτέρα*, sometimes then a priest's wife was called *πρεσβυτέρα*; so presumably a bishop's wife, or even perhaps his mother (in the case of a bishop who had no wife), could be called *episcopa*.

⁵⁵ Canon 15 lays down the conditions for the ordination of women deacons (Tanner, 94).

⁵⁶ See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books, 1993 edn.), 292. For amplification of this point, see details of a Byzantine ordination rite for women deacons and the role of women deacons in the patristic church, in Wijngaards, *Ordination of Women*, chs. 17 and 18.

not a principle of natural law; there is no category 1 or 2 moral obligation not to ordain women to the priesthood. As Duns Scotus commented, only Christ himself could forbid the ordination of women.⁵⁷ So is there a reason why God (through Christ) would have commanded his church to confine ordination (to the priesthood and so the episcopate) to men? I think that there is such a reason. It is very central to the teaching of Jesus that the 'greatness' of a person is not a matter of his or her being a leader. Mark reports Jesus as saying: 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'⁵⁸ Greatness consists in service, not in giving orders. And the message is the same in John's account of the words of Jesus after the washing of the disciples feet: 'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.'⁵⁹

That greatness consists in powerful leadership has been a belief of almost every society, and one especially prevalent in our own society. In Britain today all major political parties see the ideal for our society as a 'meritocracy'. Those who have the most 'merit', which we may charitably interpret as 'would make the best leaders', lead; others serve. Lip service is often paid to the great worth of miners, postmen, and schoolteachers (and the occasional honour is given to them); but schools are meant to encourage 'ambition', and succeeding in one's ambition means leading—a position of authority (not unlimited of course, and perhaps democratically elected, but authority all the same). In consequence, if society is ruled by those who desire to rule and are 'meritorious', the ruled will be seen by everyone (as they are seen) as inferior beings. In an earlier society which insisted that people should 'know their place' (despite the bad attitudes which this insistence so often encouraged), it was at any rate well understood that the best people sometimes had the lowest place. Some societies have tried to avoid this problem by trying to force everyone to occupy the same place—send the professors to work in the fields for a few years, said Chairman

⁵⁷ Duns Scotus, *Reportata Parisiensia*, bk. 4. dist. 25. qq. 2 and 18.

⁵⁸ Mark 10: 42–5. I have replaced the NRSV's 'are tyrants over them' by 'exercise authority over them'. The Greek *κατεξουσιάζουσιν* does not seem to me to carry any implication of tyranny.

⁵⁹ John 13: 14.

Mao. But this does not really solve the problem, for the average farm labourer or schoolteacher is going to be quite useless as a professor, and conversely. Not everyone has the ability to lead, and without leaders of some permanence a society has no direction. Certainly there have to be leaders in the divine society in order to guide new members to lead a demanding way of life and to understand a not too obvious revelation.

The crucial thing is to get home the idea that a person's worth as an individual has nothing to do with whether they are a leader or not. And that is surely what Paul meant by 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, ... slave or free, ... male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus',⁶⁰ a biblical quotation which is often used in support of the ordination of women. And one way—perhaps the only way—to bring home the irrelevance of overall worth to leadership is to lay down that some evidently highly competent would-be leaders shall not be leaders, but shall do instead other jobs at which they are also highly competent and which are just as important to the well-being of the community as is leading it. And one way—perhaps the only way—to ensure that the society sees that these people are highly competent and are doing greatly worthwhile jobs other than leading is to make the arbitrary restriction as to who should lead cut across the closest social units where people know each other the best—in other words, across the family, between wife and husband, brother and sister. If God barred, say, black people or Gentiles from ordination, then there would be a tendency for the ordained and those eligible for ordination and their families to treat the blacks or Gentiles as inferior, and not to associate too much with them. But both women and men are indispensable members of the same family. Any male or female with any Christian moral sentiments is bound to recognize the enormous moral worth of so many of the other sex, and indeed the natural ability of some of them to function as leaders. You can't despise your wife or husband, your mother or father; they are too important to you. Or at least, if anyone is to be barred from ordination for an arbitrary reason, the closest family members are the least likely to be despised for this reason. God could have barred women, or he could have barred men, from ordination. So, in the absence of a reason one way or the other, there is a point in him confining church leadership to males—as with family headship, the point is the very arbitrariness of such a choice. And perhaps it would be too confusing if church leadership were given to one sex and family

⁶⁰ Gal. 3: 28.

headship to the other sex. And of course there is one all-important job which plausibly God had in mind for women to do, which men can't do, which is to give birth; so maybe God had in mind for women to devote more of their time than do men to a closely related job—the nurturing and educating of children. So he may have had other jobs in mind for men.

Confining the episcopate and the priesthood to men is compatible with recognizing the enormous moral worth of very many women. The Church calendar is bursting with female saints; and it has revered Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the greatest non-divine human who ever lived, giving her at times—to my mind—quite excessive honours. I conclude that God has reason (of kind B to forward a right understanding of human greatness to confine church leadership in a recognizably arbitrary way, a reason which would apply as much (and in fact, rather more strongly) in the twenty-first century as in earlier times; and hence it is plausibly a category 3 obligation on the Church not to ordain women to the priesthood or the episcopate.

I now turn to two issues on which the Church has been accused of teaching false moral doctrines over many past centuries, doctrines now abandoned, where it having taught these doctrines is used as evidence that its claims about revealed doctrine cannot be trusted. I shall argue with respect to these issues that either the doctrine concerned a category 4 obligation no longer binding, or that the Church did not ascribe sufficient importance to the doctrine which it taught or teach it with sufficient unanimity for it to count as a central Christian doctrine.

USURY

Lending money on condition of receiving interest was generally condemned in Old and New Testaments and in church tradition until the fifteenth century, though not always with great force. It does not seem to have been treated with the kind of seriousness⁶¹ which would lead to it being a central Christian doctrine. The Old Testament verse most frequently cited in later tradition was Psalm 15: 5 which sees among the qualities of those who 'fear the Lord' that they 'do not lend

⁶¹ For this point and for the full story of the Catholic church's changing view of usury, see J. T. Noonan, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Harvard University Press, 1957).

money at interest'; and several other verses echo the same sentiment.⁶² The saying of Christ, 'Lend, expecting nothing in return',⁶³ was interpreted as a condemnation of lending money for interest, for the first time in a papal document by Pope Urban III in the twelfth century; though it might equally naturally be interpreted in a stronger sense as commanding lending when you do not expect even the capital to be returned. But early church prohibition of usury gives some plausibility to it being derivable from the deposit of faith, perhaps from the Old Testament, reinforced by unwritten tradition. However, investing in a risky enterprise (in modern terminology, buying shares in order to share in the profits) was always recognized as legitimate; the difference between investing and usury lay in the fact that in the former case if the enterprise failed, no one still owed the investor his capital sum, let alone anything extra. But with the development of property insurance and the money market in the fifteenth century, a sophisticated analysis of the nature of lending money to a business enterprise, deeming it to constitute a 'triple contract', had the consequence that lending money to a business to be repaid with interest was deemed legitimate. And gradually lending money to be repaid at a low rate of interest to anyone, whether a business or a private individual, came to be seen as permissible by all Christian churches. So a doctrine regarded, though not with great seriousness, as derivable from the deposit of faith was now regarded as not so derivable. The most that might still be ruled out is lending at a high rate of interest.

The tortuous process by which this result was reached could have been much shortened by the recognition that the circumstances under which the prohibition of usury was originally issued—the trading and lending circumstances of Old Testament Israel—were radically different from those of the sophisticated financial system which emerged in fifteenth-century Europe. The difference is that almost all lending in Israel would have been by the rich to the poor who needed the money to feed or house their families; whereas today most lending is by people of moderate means to the rich or to institutions. The latter do not need the money in order to avoid starvation, but they want it in order to get even richer. It can hardly be a category 1 or 2 obligation not to enter voluntarily into a contract to lend money to be repaid with interest—so

⁶² Exod. 22: 25; Lev. 25: 36; Ezek. 18: 8 and 22: 12. Deut. 23: 19–20 reserves its condemnation for those who lend at interest to Israelites, while permitting such lending to Gentiles.

⁶³ Luke 6: 35.

long as the rate of interest is moderate. It might well be a category 1 or 2 obligation not to do so at a large rate of interest; and if it is not, there is abundant reason (of kind B) for God to forbid lending at such a rate to the poor. People should not take advantage of others' real need for money by putting them in a position where they might owe sums of money which they could repay only with great difficulty, if at all. But lending at moderate interest to some person or institution who can easily repay or whose bankruptcy will not cause the starvation of the borrower can be of mutual advantage. So the prohibition of usury can be regarded as creating only a category 4 obligation, applicable in circumstances which (for the most part) do not hold in today's developed world. And even this cannot be regarded as central Christian doctrine.

SLAVERY

The Church has often been judged morally deficient for its apparent approval of the institution of slavery in past centuries. But, since I think that the Church's attitude to slavery in the past is by no means as clear as its detractors have suggested, I need to begin with some history.

In the ancient world a slave was simply a person who was obliged to serve one master, normally for all his life (unless liberated), though—see below—occasionally just for a fixed number of years. Some slaves were well paid and looked after, and did sophisticated jobs—they might be scribes or sculptors. It was a job, normally for life, with guaranteed board and lodging, and some slaves would have been well content with their condition. At the other extreme, of course, some slaves were paid nothing, made to work very hard for long hours, and badly mistreated. And Roman law⁶⁴ and in the early period Israelite law⁶⁵ gave them very few rights indeed—for example, very little protection against cruel punishment. People became slaves either through capture (especially in war), or because they were children of a slave mother, or voluntarily (e.g. selling themselves into slavery in order to pay their debts) or as a legal punishment; and once enslaved, they could be sold to a new owner.

The Old Testament was concerned with what laws ought to operate in a Jewish state; and, after its early period, it contained firm legislation

⁶⁴ See W. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), i. 300–8; ii. 61–4.

⁶⁵ See Exod. 21: 21.

that Israelite slaves should be given their freedom (with a generous bounty) after at most six years.⁶⁶ Both the Old Testament passages which lay down this legislation envisage that some slaves might prefer to continue as slaves for life, and they provide a ceremony for legitimizing the status of those who expressed that preference. All this legislation applied only to Israelite slaves; there was no automatic emancipation for non-Israelite slaves. If the legislation for emancipation after six years had been obeyed, 'slavery' (of Israelite slaves) would simply have been a long period of compulsory service; there would have been by law no lifelong Israelite slaves. Jeremiah, however, claimed that the law was not being obeyed; and that a covenant between King Zedekiah and the people totally to abolish the slavery of Israelites had been obeyed only for a short period, after which the purportedly liberated slaves were dragged back again into slavery. Because this covenant had been broken, Jeremiah proclaimed, Jerusalem and all Judaea would be enslaved by the Babylonians.⁶⁷

By the time of Jesus, however, there would probably have been very few slaves in Palestine.⁶⁸ And that must have been one reason why, although Jesus told many parables involving slaves, he said nothing—as far as we know—about whether slavery was a legitimate institution. Another reason was that probably for the major part of his ministry Jesus believed that the present world-order would come to an end, so it was of little relevance how the present world-order should be reformed. What was far more important was how people should behave towards each other in the situations in which they found themselves. But I would find it implausible to suppose that Jesus did not endorse at least the official Old Testament teaching—that slavery (of an Israelite slave) should last for no more than six years. In his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, he read the passage from Isaiah including the words that the Lord 'has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, ... to let the

⁶⁶ Exod. 21: 2–11, improved by Deut. 15: 12–18. See also Lev. 25: 39–43. Exodus excludes certain female slaves from the law of emancipation: Deuteronomy treats male and female alike.

⁶⁷ Jer. 34: 8–22.

⁶⁸ The Jews would have acquired no new slaves by conquest for the previous three centuries, since Judaea had been an occupied country without an army. Some Jews might have become slaves through inability to pay debts, although Jewish law did not provide for this possibility. The Roman governor and his officials would have had slaves. The only actual slaves referred to in the Gospels are those of a Roman centurion (Matt. 8: 8–13, paralleling Luke 7: 1–10), a 'royal official' (John 4: 51), and the High Priest (Mark 14: 47, paralleled in the other Gospels).

oppressed go free', and he said of this passage, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'⁶⁹ And it is natural to suppose that Jesus would not distinguish between Israelite and foreign slaves, in view of his teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan that how we should treat each other was independent of our race. So it is plausible to suppose that Jesus would have condemned any lifelong slavery,

What Jesus and his followers were concerned to emphasize was the equal moral worth of master and slave, and what followed from that about how Christian masters and slaves should behave towards each other. Comparing himself to a master and his disciples to slaves, Jesus said that slaves would be equal to their master in their suffering and the privilege of serving others.⁷⁰ St Paul, while taking the institution of slavery for granted, affirms that 'there is no longer slave or free ... in Christ Jesus'.⁷¹ Within the Church no distinction was made between slave and free. The New Testament letters of Paul and others taught that slaves should obey their masters, as good servants ready to suffer if need be as Christ did,⁷² and that masters were to treat them with proper respect.⁷³ Paul's Letter to Philemon is a powerful plea to a master to treat with kindness Onesimus, a runaway slave whom Paul is sending back to him. And the Church of subsequent centuries took a similar line. Liberating slaves was regarded as a good thing—the *Didascalía*, a third-century Christian work concerned with the practical ordering of church life, envisaged that one of the purposes for which church funds might properly be used was the liberation of slaves;⁷⁴ but there was clearly a problem here, since slaves might become Christians solely in order to secure their emancipation.⁷⁵ However, liberating one's own slaves was not in general regarded as an obligation on Christians, merely a work of supererogation. And in the world of the Roman Empire, as in ancient Israel, being a slave could have certain advantages. John Chrysostom allowed that 'kindness' to the slaves might be a reason for having one or two slaves.⁷⁶ The whole

⁶⁹ Luke 4: 16–21.

⁷⁰ Matt. 10: 24–5; John 13: 16 and 15: 20.

⁷¹ Gal. 3: 28.

⁷² Eph. 6: 5–8; 1 Pet. 2: 18–25; Col. 3: 22–5; 1 Tim. 6: 1–2; Titus 2: 9–10.

⁷³ Eph. 6: 9; Col. 4: 41.

⁷⁴ *Didascalía*, ch. 18.

⁷⁵ Ignatius of Antioch (c. 106 AD) warns against slaves setting their hearts on gaining their liberty at the church's expense (*Letter to Polycarp*, 4).

⁷⁶ See John Chrysostom, *Homily 40 on I Corinthians* 15: 29–34 (PG 61. 354). Aristotle (*Politics*, 1.5) wrote that some humans, the foolish whom we might call the 'mentally retarded', are 'slaves by nature', and that it is to their advantage to be 'under government'. We think so too today, though we don't call these people 'slaves'. Basil of

institution was nevertheless regarded as a bad thing—Augustine and others thought that it was a consequence of original sin. And it does not seem very plausible, in view of all the above points, that the legitimacy of slavery can be properly derived from the deposit of faith.

But when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the issue of the legal status of slavery was now clearly one to be faced by Christians. The Christian emperors made no attempts to abolish slavery, but a church ceremony for emancipating slaves was introduced, and the Church continued to regard it as a good thing for masters to emancipate their slaves. But there were voices raised in protest against the whole institution, the loudest and most explicit of which was that of St Gregory of Nyssa, who condemned the whole institution as immoral, and said that all Christian masters ought to emancipate their slaves.⁷⁷ John Chrysostom preached that people did not need slaves, although, as mentioned above, he allowed that there might be a good reason for having one or two.

And so there developed in the Church two different attitudes to slavery. The first insisted on the legitimacy of continuing to operate the laws on slavery derived from the pagan Roman Empire. The second promoted the doctrine that it was good for masters to emancipate their slaves. I mentioned above four sources of enslavement: enslavement of prisoners of a just war, enslavement of children of slave mothers, voluntary enslavement, and penal enslavement by the state. The Catholic church condemned the capture of men and women (except in a war fought for other reasons) for the purposes of slavery; and some authorities condemned enslaving prisoners of any war. But, although so many tolerated the continued enslavement of children of slave mothers, no one could give a plausible justification for this practice.⁷⁸ Duns Scotus⁷⁹ pointed out that the command in New Testament letters to slaves to obey their masters did not imply that slavery was a just institution. He

Caesarea also wrote that it is good for those lacking intelligence to be slaves; see his *On the Spirit*, 20. 51.

⁷⁷ See his *Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes* (PG 44. 665–71).

⁷⁸ Aquinas justified this as a case of children rightly suffering for the sins of their parents—see his *De Malo*, 4. 8. 15—not a principle to which either the later Old Testament or the Gospels gave general endorsement—see e.g. Jer. 31: 29 and John 9: 3.

⁷⁹ In *IV Sentences*, dist. 36, q. 1, Scotus also wrote that although, as Aristotle had claimed, some people are natural slaves, in that they need to be told what to do by others, this was something to be dealt with in some way (e.g. by society looking after them) other than by enslaving them.

taught that slavery as a result of capture in war was inhumane, and that the only legitimate kinds of enslavement were voluntary enslavement (stupid though it was, he commented, for anyone to enslave themselves) and penal enslavement by the state, the modern equivalent of which is life imprisonment. It is hard to deny the legitimacy of the latter. Scotus also condemned the sale of slaves. He did not explicitly discuss the situation of children of slave mothers, but it would seem to follow from what he wrote that they ought not to be enslaved. If Scotus's views had been followed, slavery would soon have died out. However, from 'the sixth century and right up until the twentieth century it has been common Catholic teaching that the social, economic, and legal institution of slavery is morally legitimate provided that the master's title of ownership is valid, and provided that the slave is properly looked after both mentally and spiritually'.⁸⁰ And the same goes for much Protestant and Orthodox teaching (at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century). So slavery lingered on in the milder form of serfdom in Northern Europe until the sixteenth century, and in Russia until the nineteenth. But the discovery of America led to the slave trade, the vast enterprise of capturing Africans and sending them there to work in the plantations in America. The slave trade was condemned by various Popes (because these slaves had been made slaves by the unjust use of force); but Popes continued to declare the institution of slavery as such legitimate. However, protest movements, often inspired by Christians, led to its general abolition during the nineteenth century (except in isolated parts of the world). In 1966 the Second Vatican Council condemned the institution of slavery as 'infamous'.⁸¹ The Catholic church had taken a long time to reach that conclusion.

So much for history. It shows that the Church gave two kinds of teaching about slavery: about whether or not masters and governments ought to release slaves, and about how slaves and masters ought to behave towards each other, given the institution. I shall argue that, while its teaching on the former issue was sometimes false, there was not the kind of unanimity over many past centuries which would make it a central Christian doctrine; nor are there grounds for supposing that it can be properly derived from the deposit of faith; and that its teaching

⁸⁰ J. F. Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church* (Barry Rose, 1975), 10. This book gives a useful account of the history of the attitude of the Roman Catholic church to slavery.

⁸¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 27 and 29; Tanner, 1085 and 1086.

on the latter issue was plausibly true (informing Christians of a category 4 obligation).

We can all now agree that masters have a duty—a category 1 or 2 obligation—to liberate their slaves (i.e. ‘slaves’ in the sense defined), except those whose enslavement is a punishment by the state and perhaps those who have become slaves voluntarily. And if masters do not liberate their slaves, governments have a duty to make them do so. The Old Testament did teach this duty—in respect of Israelite slaves. The Christian Church of the first 1,800 years taught that it was good to liberate slaves, but it did not normally teach this as obligatory. During the central Christian centuries, two immensely influential theologians (Gregory in the fourth century and Scotus in the fourteenth) taught that there was an obligation to liberate all or almost all slaves; and no one suggested that they had expressed a heretical view. So the doctrine that no one had an obligation to liberate slaves cannot be regarded as a central Christian doctrine.

I think that it follows from any plausible systematization of the teaching of Jesus that keeping slaves is immoral. His own claim that he had come to liberate the captives, and his advocacy of the ‘golden rule’, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’,⁸² and much else in his teaching seem naturally to entail the immorality of anyone not enslaved as a just punishment being forced to be a slave. And when ecclesial bodies did come to teach officially the immorality of slavery, they reached their view on the basis of such a systematization of the teaching of Jesus and from the examples of Jesus and his followers. The Second Vatican Council regards the ‘infamy’ of slavery as on a level with many other evils, some of which—‘prostitution’ and ‘the selling of women and children’—were always condemned explicitly. Others of the evils which it condemned in the same list are ones which would not have occurred on most lists of evils in, say, the fifth century, and ones whose boundaries are vague and about which it is not always clear who is at fault in allowing them to occur—‘subhuman living conditions’, and ‘disgraceful working conditions’. The Church took three or four centuries officially to proclaim the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation on the basis of the teaching of Jesus. It took a lot longer to reach the conclusion that slavery was immoral; in this it was surely gravely at fault, but it was certainly not central Christian doctrine that slavery was a legitimate institution.

⁸² Matt. 7: 12.

What the early church was concerned about was that masters and slaves should behave towards each other with respect and generosity. We are so often in unwelcome situations, not through our choice, from which we cannot escape—either physically cannot escape, or morally ought not to escape. They include having to care for very sick or disabled family members, bad marriages, working for the only employer in the neighbourhood, being conscripted into the army to fight a possibly just war, and so on. The early church thought of slavery as in this category—an unfortunate situation in which some people found themselves, and from which they could not readily escape. Indeed, given the desirability of obeying the laws of the land if to do so did not violate a Christian obligation, the Church thought that in general slaves ought not to escape even if they could. The Church taught that in this situation slaves ought to do their work efficiently and with respect for their masters. In modern terms the command to slaves is: no go-slows, no strikes, and no revolutions. And this follows from the teaching of Jesus that ‘if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile’.⁸³ St Paul advised slaves: ‘Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.’⁸⁴ This extreme instruction is most naturally understood as a commendation, rather than a command creating an obligation; and certainly this was the way the early church understood it. A few verses earlier Paul (‘I and not the Lord’) had advised married Christians to continue to live with unbelieving spouses on the ground that they might ‘save’ the latter, and presumably he hoped that in the same spirit Christian slaves might ‘save’ their masters. But Paul’s teaching seems to be that slaves had an obligation not to escape. It was by this kind of action, non-resistance to the unjust force of authorities while attempting to persuade those authorities to lead better lives, that Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. If Christianity had led a slave revolt, it would probably have suffered the fate of most other slave revolts in the ancient world—being put down with far more brutal force than was used in the actual persecutions of Christians. Even if such a slave revolt had succeeded and changed the organization of society, it would not have changed souls. But by meekness Christianity could conquer the world. So God has a reason of kind B to impose on slaves the obligation to be dutiful servants. Or at least, God has reason to impose this obligation on Christian slaves, for they can show their masters by their actions

⁸³ Matt. 5: 41.

⁸⁴ 1 Cor. 7: 21.

how they ought to live. All this is of course no reason why free men and women and slaves themselves should not work to get the system changed by peaceful means; or even reason why free persons should not in certain circumstances use force to free slaves. And it is no reason why some slaves should not for the sake of all other slaves simply cease to serve when the system is beginning to collapse and will not be repressed by force. So maybe the obligation on slaves to be dutiful slaves is a category 4 obligation applicable only to slaves in a society where the system of slavery is taken for granted and disobedient slaves would be repressed with brutal force. But God does have good reason to impose this obligation on Christian slaves in such a society, so it is no objection to Christianity that this obligation holds. The obligation is a (category 4) central Christian doctrine. Of course, it is also the case that masters ought to care for their slaves with respect and generosity (surely a category 1 obligation); and the Christian tradition certainly said that.

I have considered eleven of the most controversial items of traditional Christian moral teaching. I have argued that most of them are central Christian doctrines (in my sense), however the boundaries of the Church are drawn. I have argued that all these central Christian doctrines are properly derivable from the deposit of faith—with the one possible exception of the Church's teaching on contraception. Hence in respect of these doctrines, as in respect of the central theological doctrines considered in Chapters 8 and 9, and the doctrine of the authority of Scripture considered in Chapter 10, the Christian Revelation satisfies the third test for being a true revelation (the plausibility of the derivation of its doctrines from the deposit of faith). (If the teaching on contraception was not so derivable, and also was a central Christian doctrine—which is not totally evident—that would give some reason to believe that God had not prohibited contraception at all and so that the Church had taught a false doctrine as all-important truth. But although one isolated exception of the Church teaching a false doctrine as all-important would perhaps be compatible with its general reliability, it would inevitably count to some extent against it.) I have argued that all these central moral doctrines (including the prohibition of contraception, subject to a possible qualification) are either necessary moral truths (in category 1 or 2) or are such that God would have reason to command everyone or all Christians, either for all time or merely for the early Christian centuries, to obey them. Hence it is plausible to suppose that the latter doctrines constitute category 3 or category 4 moral truths. I emphasize that given my earlier arguments for the authority of the Church, the

mere fact that the Church has universally taught these doctrines as all-important for many centuries is grounds for believing that God has commanded us to fulfil the stated obligations. but insofar as it could be shown that conforming to any of these purported obligations would breach a category 1 obligation (and so that God would have no right to impose them on us) that would show that God had not imposed the stated obligations. I have claimed that not merely is there no reason to suppose that conforming to any of the obligations I have discussed would involve a breach of a category 1 obligation, but that in all these cases God has a reason to issue the relevant command—not that he would necessarily do so, but that there is a point in his issuing such a command; and so additional reason for supposing that he has done so. So in respect of these central moral doctrines, as in respect of the doctrine of the authority of Scripture, the Christian Revelation satisfies the fourth test for a true revelation. The fact that this holds in respect of so many controversial items of moral teaching provides some reason for supposing that it holds with respect to all central Christian moral doctrines.

Note that the reasons which I have suggested as to why God might create all these category 3 or 4 moral truths are all of the same general kind. He tells some people to do something difficult in order to help other existing people (or to create new people). This is the reason, I have suggested, why he might tell those in a difficult marriage to remain faithful, homosexuals to restrain their sexual inclinations, and slaves in ancient society to serve their masters well. They are reasons of the same kind as reasons as to why he might tell all of us, including those of us to whom this does not come naturally, to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. God wants his good purposes to be brought about by us, and wants us in the process to become naturally generous people.

12

Conclusion

WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

I have been assuming throughout this book that on the evidence of natural theology it is not too improbable that there is a God, a view for which I have argued elsewhere. I argued in Chapter 5 that if there is a God, he might be expected to reveal to humans truths of central importance to the conduct of their life on Earth—including truths about what God is like, that he became incarnate to identify with our suffering and to deal with our sins, and moral information about how we ought to live; and perhaps also to provide encouragement for us to live well by offering us the prospect of Heaven.

However clever humans might be, they could not reach true conclusions on some of these matters without help; and in fact humans are not clever enough to reach true conclusions on most of these matters without help. Nevertheless, there is great value in humans helping each other to reach their own conclusions on these matters; so the kind of revelation which we might well expect to be given would have enough content to provide something for humans to get to grips with, but not enough detail for humans not to need to sort things out for themselves. An original revelation would need an interpreting community, a church, in which its content could be preserved, developed, and interpreted so as to yield more precise answers to old questions and to answer new questions, and it must be part of the content of that revelation which community is the interpreting community. I argued in Chapter 6 that there would be evidence that a purported revelation was indeed a revelation from God in so far as it had somewhat of the above character, it was backed by a powerful divine miracle, its content was not too improbable on evidence other than that it had been revealed, and it was properly amplified in a church to yield a developed content which was also not too improbable.

In the light of these general considerations, I began to investigate the purported Christian Revelation—after commenting that Christianity alone of the great religions was a serious candidate for providing a revelation of the above kind. I argued in Chapter 7 that the content of the original revelation (in the teaching of Jesus and his apostles) was the sort of content that one would expect a revelation of the above kind to have—that Jesus led a perfect life in difficult circumstances, that he was divine, that his life and death atoned for our sins, and that he founded a church to continue his work and develop his teaching. Jesus taught that the present world-order would come to an end with the Parousia; after this life the good would go to Heaven, being separated finally from the bad. He also taught that we ought to live in what would otherwise be a supererogatorily good way, and he gave us some detailed teaching about our moral obligations to our fellow humans.

God might well judge that the present world-order in which humans suffer and are allowed to sin (albeit for good reason) was a costly experiment which should not continue for ever, and hence the need for a Parousia. It is not implausible that among the choices which God would give to humans would be the choice of allowing themselves to become permanently bad and so alienated from God, so that there be the possibility of a Hell as well as a Heaven. (Of course, it might turn out that no one became permanently bad, and even if they did, maybe God would allow them the possibility of extinction rather than an endless life of alienation from God.) And I argued that reflection on the nature of moral goodness leads us to see that God might well have commanded us to live to some extent in the generous way of the Sermon on the Mount. I argued in Chapter 11 that it would be not too improbable a priori that God would have commanded us to observe the detailed moral teaching of Jesus and his apostles (either because it is necessarily true, or because God would have a reason for making it contingently true); and thus it would be obligatory to do so. So, I claimed, there is overall some prior reason for supposing that a revelation from God would have the kind of content that the original Christian Revelation had, and it is plausible to suppose (i.e. not very improbable on evidence other than evidence that it has been revealed) that that content is true. Good evidence that the Christian Revelation had this content means that it passes the first test for a purported revelation being a genuine (major) revelation.

But the fact that there is a certain prior probability that a revelation from God would have the above character is not enough reason to

suppose that the Christian Revelation is indeed a revelation from God. To authenticate this claim requires a divine signature. If there is a God, he has power to intervene in the natural order, and reason to do so in a striking way in order to authenticate a revelation. The Resurrection of Jesus, if it occurred in the way reported in the Gospels, would clearly be such an authenticating event. So the second test for the Christian Revelation to satisfy is that there should be significant evidence (by way of witness reports and reactions of those involved) that the Resurrection took place. There should be enough evidence to show that it happened, given that there is substantial evidence for the existence of a God with some reason to bring it about (including the reason of authenticating a revelation with the above content). I argued briefly that there is enough such evidence.

The Christian Revelation available to us is not merely the original revelation (in its broadest outline), but the one developed and refined in the Church. The third test that the purported Christian Revelation must satisfy is that it should be plausible that the central parts of the Church's developed teaching have been properly derived from the original revelation. In Chapter 8 I analysed what 'proper derivation' should involve. The original Christian Revelation can be developed in many different ways, and there will be disputes about which way is the proper one; but this criterion will rule out some developments as clearly improper. In Chapter 8 I also provided criteria for determining which (if any) ecclesial body constitutes the present-day church, and which of its teaching has authority. The 'best candidate' among ecclesial bodies for satisfying the criteria of connectedness and continuity of organization and doctrine with the church of the apostles is the Church which Jesus founded. If there are two or more such bodies which satisfy these criteria almost equally well, we must conclude that the Church is divided. I claimed in Chapters 8–11 that, however the issue of which ecclesial body is the 'best candidate' for being the Church founded by Jesus is resolved, still, if there has been a Christian Revelation, there is at least a set of doctrines which I called central Christian doctrines (almost all of) which must be true. These are those doctrines which have plausibly been derived from the original revelation and have been held by all ecclesial bodies with a substantial claim to connectedness and continuity of organization and doctrine with the apostolic church and regarded by them as all-important. They include the doctrines of the Nicene Creed, the doctrine that the Bible is 'true', and some universally held moral teaching. But since it is not always obvious what

some ancient doctrine amounts to—when it is to be taken literally, and when metaphorically—I provided general criteria for determining when sentences are to be understood in different ways in Part I. I applied the distinctions and criteria which I provided there to theological definitions in Chapter 9, and to the issue of how the Bible should be understood in Chapter 10. And I considered in Chapter 11 how Christian moral teaching should be understood, and in particular when it should be understood as applying to some particular community at a particular time and when it should be understood as applying to the whole world for all time. Chapters 8–11 constituted a sustained argument to show that it was plausible to suppose that the developed Christian Revelation satisfies the third test for that revelation to be true, that its developed content (and especially the central Christian doctrines) was properly derived from its original content.

And finally there is the all-important fourth test for the Christian Revelation to satisfy, that not merely should the contents of the original revelation be not too improbable (on evidence other than evidence that they have been revealed), but that the same should hold for the developed doctrines. If a church claimed to extrapolate from the teaching of its founder that rape and pillage are good actions, that would count significantly against that church being a vehicle of revelation. I argued in Chapter 11, with respect to much Christian moral teaching which has the status of central Christian doctrine, and especially those parts which are most controversial today, that it does have a sufficient degree of probability (on evidence other than that it has been revealed) to give it the status of revealed doctrine. And I argued in Chapter 10 that so does the claim that the Bible is ‘true’ when the Bible is understood in the right way—that is, when it is understood in the light of central Christian doctrines and known truths of science and history—and so it is ‘true’ if central Christian doctrines are true. I have argued elsewhere that Christianity’s central theological definitions also have the requisite modest degree of probability (on evidence similarly restricted). The conclusions of this book are conclusions subject to the assumption that those doctrines do have that degree of probability, and to the prior assumption that there is a modest probability on other evidence that there is a God.

I now repeat a crucial point which I made in Chapter 6. There is no other plausible candidate revelation for satisfying *either* the second test or the three other tests (taken together) nearly as well as the Christian Revelation. No other religion has as its foundation event a purported

violation of natural laws for which there is a reasonable amount of historical evidence. And other founders of great religions who taught plausible doctrines about the nature of God and about morality, lived good lives, and founded churches, did not teach that they were God Incarnate or purport to atone for human sins. This shows that the *coincidence* of the satisfaction of both sets of tests (even if only to a moderate degree) in one candidate revelation is an extremely unlikely event in the normal course of things—that is, unless someone planned it. The only possible person with enough power and reason to produce this coincidence about whose existence we have evidence is God. But if the Christian Revelation is not a true revelation, it would have been deceptive of God to bring about such a coincidence of two significant amounts of evidence favouring the truth of this revelation. It would be like leaving someone's fingerprints at the murder scene when they had not committed the murder. In virtue of his perfect goodness, God would not do that sort of thing. If God planned the coincidence in connection with the Christian Revelation, then that revelation is very probably true.

No exact degree of probability can be ascribed to any scientific theory or any historical claim. But one can have arguments which utilize the probability calculus to show that if certain claims have probabilities within certain ranges, then some other claim has a probability within a certain other range. In the Appendix I express the argument of this book in this formal way, to show that the Christian Revelation is very probable.

THE ROOM FOR DEBATE

Outside the area of central Christian doctrines there lie Christian doctrines which are more peripheral—either in the respect that they have been taught only by some and not all ecclesial bodies, or in the respect that the Church has not assigned them maximum importance. It is, I have urged, plausibly part of the point of a revelation that it should provide room within a basic scheme for its recipients to work out for themselves further consequences of that scheme. Such working out is bound to involve significant doctrinal disputes. Ecclesial bodies have sometimes claimed for their more peripheral doctrines a central status which their history in Christian tradition does not warrant. During the 'science and religion' controversies of the seventeenth and nineteenth

centuries some ecclesial bodies declared it to be heretical to deny that the Earth was stationary while the sun and the planets revolved around it, and heretical to deny the 'special creation' of man (i.e. that man was not descended from animals, but was created immediately by God). But the major ecclesial bodies did not give these doctrines the requisite maximum importance to make them central Christian doctrines, and some of them had no wish to oppose the scientific evidence. I argued in Chapters 9 and 10 that the great theologians of the past regarded as orthodox by the Church did not see the Christian Revelation as containing the sort of scientific teaching in dispute in these controversies. There have been times when the legitimacy of slavery and the prohibition of the ordination of women to the priesthood have been claimed as Christian doctrines; but, I argued in Chapter 11, these doctrines were not taught with the sufficient degree of unanimity and assigned a sufficient degree of importance for them to acquire the status of central Christian doctrines. In illustration of the criteria for determining whether such doctrines could nevertheless claim to be plausible, I expounded my view that the legitimacy of slavery is not a plausible doctrine, whereas the prohibition on the ordination of women to the priesthood is a plausible doctrine.

I have argued that we need to approach the question of whether there has been a revelation having sorted out beforehand two crucial issues. The first is: What sort of a revelation are we looking for? A golden tablet thrown down from the sky, preserved in a sealed glass case from all interference, including radioactivity? Or a whole way of looking at things, embedded in documents and in a community, and continually being worked out by them? And the second is: Which general theory of the world (theism or naturalism) do we think is best supported by other evidence? For general theory is crucial for assessing particular claims. Within this framework we must weigh up detailed philosophical arguments about the extent of prior probability of Christian doctrines and detailed historical arguments about the acts and teaching of Jesus, and about which is the 'closest continuer' of the church of the apostles. Weakness in some parts of this web of evidence may be compensated by strength in other parts.

That evidence for the truth of revelation comes from many sources, weakness in one source being compensated by strength in another, and that the cumulative force of the total evidence makes it probable that the Christian Revelation is a true one, has been, I believe, in effect the view of many Christian theologians over the past two millennia. The obvious exceptions are those writers of the last two centuries whose theological

thinking derives from the philosophies of Kant and Kierkegaard and who seem to hold that faith in the Christian Revelation can in some sense be 'rational' without there being any evidence for it. Yet, while this cumulative force has often been stressed, not all apologists have given such a central place in their scheme to the evidence of eyewitnesses about the Resurrection as I have done in my scheme and, as I claim, theologians of the first two centuries did in theirs.¹ Later theologians tended to emphasize other kinds of evidence (e.g. inner religious experience, the 'miracle' of the conversion of the Western world without the use of force, and contemporary miracles) as well as the continuity of the Church's doctrine and organization back to the apostles. The reason, I believe, why they did not stress eyewitness testimony to the Resurrection was that, in ages lacking sophisticated historical research, it was a lot more difficult than in our age to sort out legend from genuine history in respect of events more than 200 years earlier. We are in a much better position than investigators between the third and sixteenth centuries to analyse what happened in Jerusalem around AD 30. The other reason is that opponents of Christianity might well allow that big 'miracles' sometimes occur—Celsus was prepared to allow to Origen, for the sake of argument, that the Resurrection occurred²—and yet deny that this showed very much about revelation. Aquinas, however, in his section in *Summa theologiae* on the Resurrection, emphasized the importance of eyewitness testimony (to the empty tomb and Resurrection appearances) in giving us knowledge of the faith.³ Duns Scotus gave a sophisticated account of the grounds for 'the credibility of Holy Scripture'—that is, revelation as contained in Holy Scripture interpreted by the Church—in which both eyewitness testimony (including testimony to miracles) and the prior probability of the doctrines contained in Scripture both play a role.⁴ And the centrality of miracle in a cumulative case was re-stressed by British empiricist philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Paley asked the rhetorical question, 'Now in what way can a revelation be made but by miracles?', and answered, 'In none which we are able to conceive.'⁵

¹ See my *Faith and Reason*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2005), 114–15.

² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1. 68. ³ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 3. 53. 1.

⁴ See Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Prologus 2. 100–19. I give his full list of these various grounds in my *Faith and Reason*, 2nd edn., 116–17. Scotus did not, however, single out the miracle of the Resurrection as especially significant.

⁵ W. Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1st pub. 1794), Prefatory Considerations. See too John Locke's defence of the crucial importance of the miracles of the New Testament as evidence for Christianity, in his *A Third Letter Concerning*

THE FINAL PICTURE

If the evidence described above ultimately supports a Christian revelation, the following (some of which I repeat from Ch. 10) is the picture of its nature and development which that evidence supports. In the centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, humans all over the world and long ago, by their experience of the world and their use of reason, acquired much knowledge of right and wrong and of the world as kept in operation by God or gods, who could—if they chose—intervene in its operation; hence, most humans concluded, they owed worship to God or gods and could ask them to do things for them. But God helped a particular community, Israel—unlike their neighbours—to see first that there was one supreme God, and then that there were no other gods, and that God did not merely keep the universe behaving predictably, but caused it to exist and kept it in existence. The Israelites came to see that God was so different from humans, and so uncontrollable by them, that it would be wrong to make any images of him; and that he had given special commands to Israel by obeying which they would be themselves made holy. These commands included commands about how to worship and how to behave towards their neighbours, respecting their lives and property and helping those in need. The promulgation of the Ten Commandments and associated teaching represent a very considerable forward step in human moral understanding. However, at first the Israelites understood by their ‘neighbours’ only their fellow Israelites. Their sense of themselves as special led them at first to believe that they had a duty to kill all the original inhabitants of the land of Palestine which they occupied, the Canaanites, in order to avoid the danger of Israelites adopting Canaanite religious practices (such as child sacrifice and ritual prostitution).

In the course of time, however, while the Israelites continued to recognize a very strong obligation to preserve their religion against contamination, they ceased to believe that they should do so by such violent means; and they came to recognize obligations to the foreigners who lived among them. Further, they began to recognize an obligation to

Toleration (1692), ch. 10. See the selection therefrom in John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (A. & C. Black, 1958); and Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), pt. 2, esp. ch. 7.

convert the world to their own religion. The Old Testament contains a record of the frequent failure of the Israelites to obey divine commands, leading to their need for atonement and forgiveness. In helping the Israelites to see all this, God provided them with much very important religious knowledge. If he did this by intervening in history to provide knowledge which they could not have discovered by mere human capacities, then he provided a revelation. The Israelites certainly thought that this is what had happened: that he revealed to them much about himself on Mount Sinai, and showed that it was he who was doing this by the miracles which aided their escape from Egypt and their survival in the desert. But much of this religious knowledge was embedded in false presuppositions about history and science; and the division between history, on the one hand, and allegories, moral, metaphysical, and historical fables, on the other hand, was not always very sharp or obvious—to the original Old Testament writers, let alone to later interpreters.

Through the teaching of Jesus, God provided far fuller knowledge of himself. Thereby God gave men and women an ideal of goodness and a hope of eternal life (including life after death) in which the good would enjoy the vision of God. He taught that the divine forgiveness for our sins which we need is freely available through his life and death, in the Church which he founded. Jesus also showed that he believed himself to be divine; and the Church taught and developed that teaching. All of this constituted a revelation (God providing us with knowledge which we could not obtain for ourselves), which God intervened in history to provide, by himself becoming human and giving us this teaching, and showing that he had done this by his miraculous Resurrection.

The process of refining Christianity, under the guidance of God the Holy Spirit, has been going for 2,000 years. It has involved removing the presuppositions of the original message, and applying the message to new circumstances and spelling it out so as to answer new questions. It has involved, for example, discovering the scope of various commands, such as the command forbidding usury; whether it forbade taking interest on any loan or only on certain kinds of loan. It has involved discovering which passages in the Bible are to be read literally and which are to be read metaphorically—for example, how to understand the opening chapters of Genesis. It has involved ‘interpretation’, but an interpretation which the interpreting Church has always seen a need to justify as properly derived from an original revelation. It could never

appeal to any new revelation. But growth of understanding there has been. Vincent of Lerins wrote:

But perhaps someone may object: Does this mean that in the Church of Christ, religion can never make any advances? No, there can be the greatest progress. Who is so envious of his fellow human beings, so hated by God that he would try to stop it? The important point to watch is this: that it is real progress of the faith, not a change in the faith. Progress means that each thing grows within itself; change, on the other hand, means that one thing is changed into something else. So, by all means, there must be growth.⁶

This passage was quoted with approval by the First Vatican Council.⁷ And the Second Vatican Council wrote: 'The tradition which comes from the apostles progresses in the church under the assistance of the holy Spirit. There is a growth in understanding of what is handed on, both the words and the realities they signify.'⁸

Gregory Nazianzen's explanation of this growth is that the Church could not swallow too much at once:

You will reach perfection only by continuing to expand. For example, the Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, the Son more obscurely. The New Testament has clearly shown the Son but only suggested the divinity of the Spirit. In our day the Spirit lives among us and gives us a clear indication of himself. For it was not without danger when the divinity of the Father was not yet confessed, to proclaim the Son openly; nor when the divinity of the Son was not yet admitted, to add on the Holy Spirit as a burden, to use a somewhat audacious term. Otherwise, weighed down, so to speak, by a nourishment that was too much for them and looking up into the sun with eyes still too weak, men risked losing even what they had. On the contrary, by gradual steps, and as David said, by 'going from strength to strength' [Ps. 84: 6], by moving 'from glory to glory' [2 Cor. 3: 18], the light of the Trinity will shine out with greater brilliance.⁹

We can, each of us, only investigate the truth of different religious doctrines to the best of our ability in co-operation with others in the time available to us. The less time and ability we have, the more we have to rely on results obtained by those experts whose honesty and learning are most evident to us, even when we realize that their results are controversial. And experts and church authorities must seek to resolve these complicated issues, including the detailed historical issues relevant

⁶ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 1. 23; trans. in Robert B. Eno, *Teaching Authority in the Early Church* (Michael Glazier Inc., 1984), 146.

⁷ Tanner, 809.

⁸ Tanner, 974.

⁹ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration*, 31. 26; trans. in Eno, *Teaching Authority*, 115.

to determining which present-day ecclesial body or bodies constitute the Church which Jesus founded. When they have done so, and all Christians come to join that body, then the content of the Christian Revelation will be more evident, and more evidently true. But it is good that this goal should be achieved by people honestly and diligently pursuing the truth for themselves.

And one way of pursuing truth honestly is to cleave to what honest inquiry leads you to believe to be true despite the eminence of those who advocate the opposite viewpoint. Vincent of Lerins sees this as the reason why heresy is allowed to flourish in the Church:

So now you see clearly the reason why Divine Providence sometimes allows certain teachers in the Church to put forward some new ideas. 'The Lord your God is testing you.' And the great test is when someone you considered to be a prophet, a follower of prophets, a teacher of and fighter for the truth, someone whom you have embraced with great veneration and love, this very person has subtly brought in dangerous errors which you have not been able immediately to detect because you are under the spell of this man and you cannot easily bring yourself to condemn him while affection for your teacher holds you.¹⁰

Metaphor abounds in the Old Testament, whether because the original human authors wrote metaphorically or because passages originally intended literally have to be taken metaphorically in the context of a Christian document. In the process of doctrinal clarification, the Church has tried to produce credal statements in which words are used univocally with their use for mundane purposes; though sometimes, and above all when talking of the divine nature, it has to make do with words used analogically in relation to their mundane use.

That revelation is something whose interpretation is to be worked out within a continuing community is, I believe, a considerable theme of the teaching of the New Testament itself, which I now illustrate in general terms. The revelation which God provides will not be very evident; it will need searching out: such is the teaching of the parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure hid in the field.¹¹ Indeed, so much of Jesus's teaching was by parable, and by showing what he did, in order to get others to see things which he did not state: 'But who do you say that I am?'¹² His answer to the question of the disciples of John, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?', was 'Go

¹⁰ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 1. 10; trans. in Eno, *Teaching Authority*, 144.

¹¹ Matt. 13: 44–6. ¹² Matt. 16: 15.

and tell John what you see and hear'.¹³ The revelation is to be spread by some telling others about it: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'¹⁴ The presence of Christ to later disciples is associated with a grouping of them: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them';¹⁵ which suggests (though it does not state) that the understanding of Christian truth will be a communal activity. Even after we have learnt what we can of the Gospel, we shall not be certain of it: 'We walk by faith, not by sight.'¹⁶ And we have a vague and confused vision: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'¹⁷

And, as I illustrated in Chapter 7 and will illustrate further here, the human author of the Fourth Gospel expounded clearly the view that the understanding of the Christian Revelation would grow in the Church through its reflection on the life and teaching of Jesus. According to John's Gospel, Jesus regarded the disciples as his 'friends', to whom he explained what he was doing. He had spoken to his disciples the message of the Father: 'The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own.'¹⁸ But the Spirit's witness will not be public: 'The world cannot receive' the Spirit of truth;¹⁹ yet it was given to the disciples after the Resurrection. And the prayer of Jesus for his disciples was not only for his immediate disciples who followed him while he was among them as a human, but 'for those who will believe in me through their word'.²⁰ The manifestation of Jesus through the Spirit is for those who love him and keep his commandments: 'They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'²¹ In other words—that is, in my words—the revelation spoken by and the deeds performed by Jesus will be interpreted by human witnesses who keep the commandments of God in the Church under the guidance of the Spirit of God. The revelation goes on; it is their witness, yet their witness to an original source, which forms the revelation.

¹³ Matt. 11: 3–4.

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 5: 7.

¹⁹ John 14: 17.

¹⁴ Matt. 9: 38.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 13: 12.

²⁰ John 17: 20.

¹⁵ Matt. 18: 20.

¹⁸ John 14: 10.

²¹ John 14: 21.

Appendix: Formalizing the Argument

LOGICAL PROBABILITY

It will, I hope, be useful to formalize the argument of this book in terms of the traditional calculus of probability, and its crucial theorem, Bayes's Theorem.¹ It will prove easier to bring out the formal structure of the argument by taking some of the evidence which I adduce in the text in a less formal way in a slightly different order from the order which I used there.

I use lower-case letters '*e*', '*h*', '*k*', '*p*', '*q*', '*r*', etc. to represent statements (in the sense defined in Ch. 1), but—as this is the more usual terminology used analysis of probability—I shall call them 'propositions' for the remainder of the Appendix. ' $P(p|q)$ ' means the probability that *p*, given *q* (or 'on *q*'). (If, e.g., *p* is a hypothesis and *q* is relevant evidence, $P(p|q)$ is the probability of hypothesis *p* on evidence *q*.) ' $P(p|q) = 1$ ' then means that, given *q*, it is certain that *p* is true. ' $P(p|q) = 0$ ' means that, given *q*, it is certain that *p* is false. Intermediate numbers indicate intermediate degrees of evidential support. I use '&' to represent 'and'—thus '*p* & *q*' means 'both *p* and *q*'—and '~' to represent 'not'—thus '~*p*' means 'it is not the case that *p*'. In my initial exposition of Bayes's Theorem I express it using letters '*e*', '*h*', and '*k*', which can represent any propositions at all; but we shall be concerned with it for the case where *e* represents observed evidence (data), *k* represents 'background evidence', and *h* is a hypothesis under investigation. The theorem is as follows:

$$P(h|e \& k) = \frac{P(e|h \& k)P(h|k)}{P(e|k)}$$

This theorem sets out in a formal way the factors which determine how observational evidence supports a hypothesis (or theory). The relevant points can be made easily enough in words, but less rigorously and with their implications less clear. $P(h|e \& k)$ may be called the posterior probability of *h*: that is, its probability on *e* as well as *k*. The theorem brings out that a hypothesis *h* is rendered

¹ I take some of the material of this Appendix from the similar appendix to my book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003). Some readers may find it helpful to look at the first part of the latter appendix for fuller explanation of the nature of logical probability, and of the difference between logical probability and probability of other kinds (e.g. statistical probability). For a far more thorough treatment of the probability calculus and its application to measuring how probable some evidence makes some hypothesis, see my *Epistemic Justification* (Clarendon Press, 2001), chs. 3 and 4.

probable by observational evidence e and background evidence k , in so far as (1) $P(e | h \& k)$ (the posterior probability of e) is high; (2) $P(h | k)$ (the prior probability of h) is high; and (3) $P(e | k)$ (the prior probability of e) is low. Background evidence typically includes evidence about how things behave in neighbouring fields of inquiry (e.g. if you are investigating the behaviour of the inert gas argon at low temperatures, there may be background evidence about how neon, another inert gas, behaves at low temperatures). But when we are dealing with big theories of physics, and above all theories of metaphysics, there are no neighbouring fields of inquiry (since these theories purport to explain so much that there are no 'neighbouring fields' outside their scope), and so we can ignore k (in technical terms, by putting it as a mere tautology). $P(h | k)$ and $P(e | k)$ will then have values determinable a priori, dependent solely on what h and e are. We may then call $P(h | k)$ and $P(e | k)$ the intrinsic probabilities of h and e .

The first condition above ($P(e | h \& k)$ high) is satisfied to the extent to which (given k) you would expect to find e if h is true. Obviously a scientific or historical theory is rendered probable in so far as the evidence is such as you would expect to find if the theory is true. However, for any e you can devise an infinite number of different incompatible theories h_n which are such that for each of them $P(e | h_n \& k)$ is high, but which make totally different predictions from each other for the future (i.e. predictions additional to e). Let e be all the observations made so far relevant to some theory of mechanics, let's say General Relativity (GTR). Then you can complicate GTR in innumerable ways such that the resulting new theories all predict e but make wildly different predictions about what will happen tomorrow. The grounds for believing that GTR is the true theory, rather than these alternative theories, will be that GTR is the simplest theory. When k is a mere tautology and so $P(h | k)$ is the intrinsic probability that h is true, that is, the measure of the strength of the a priori factors relevant to the probability of h ; these factors are, I suggest, its scope and its simplicity. A hypothesis has large scope in so far as it makes many precise claims; and the larger the scope (i.e. the more it tells us about the universe), other things being equal, the lower its intrinsic probability. But we can ignore this factor if the hypotheses which we are comparing are theories of similar scope (as I was supposing in the GTR example); and even when we are considering theories of differing scope, scientific examples show that simplicity is more important than scope for determining prior probability, for theories (which satisfy the other criteria well) of large scope are regarded as probable, so long as they are simple. The simplicity of a theory, like its scope, is something internal to that theory, not a matter of the relation of the theory to external evidence.

$P(e | k)$, the prior probability of e (which for tautological k is an intrinsic probability), is a measure of how likely e is to occur if we do not assume any particular theory to be true. By Bayes's Theorem, the lower is $P(e | k)$, the higher is the posterior probability of h on all the evidence. The normal effect of $P(e | k)$ in assessing the probability of any particular theory h is that e does not render h

very probable if you would expect to find e anyway (e.g. if it was also predicted by the main rivals of h which had significant prior probability). It follows from the probability calculus that

$$P(e | k) = P(e | h \& k)P(h | k) + P(e | \sim h \& k)P(\sim h | k)$$

The first combined term on the right-hand side, $P(e | h \& k) P(h | k)$, simply repeats the top line of Bayes's Theorem. So if the second combined term, $P(e | \sim h \& k) P(\sim h | k)$, is low relative to the first combined term, the posterior probability of h will be high; and if the second term is high relative to the first term, the posterior probability of h will be low. Put another way,

$$\begin{aligned} P(e | k) &= P(e | h \& k) P(h | k) + P(e | h_1 \& k) P(h_1 | k) \\ &\quad + P(e | h_2 \& k) P(h_2 | k) \dots \end{aligned}$$

and so on for all the h_n rival to h (where all these together with h are such that at least, and at most, one of them must be the true theory in the field). This value will clearly be determined largely by the terms $(P(e | h_n \& k) P(h_n | k))$ for which h_n has a relatively high prior probability, and which give to e a relatively high posterior probability. To the extent to which rivals to h which give e a relatively high posterior probability themselves have a low prior probability (in comparison with the prior probability of h), the posterior probability of h will be high.

THE PROBABILITY OF THEISM

I have argued elsewhere² that where t is theism, the hypothesis that there is a God of the traditional kind, and k is tautological evidence (i.e. no evidence at all), and so $P(t | k)$ is the intrinsic probability of theism, $P(t | k)$ is higher than is the intrinsic probability of any rival hypothesis purporting to explain the universe, so much higher that it has a not totally insignificant, although very low, finite probability. This is because t is a very simple hypothesis, postulating one personal being who has infinite degrees of power, knowledge, and freedom of choice (from which there follows his perfect goodness), three qualities some degree of which all persons have to have. To postulate a being with infinite power, knowledge, and freedom is simpler than postulating a being or several beings with certain very precise finite degrees of power, knowledge, and freedom. I have argued that, if there is such a being, we would expect to find (i.e. it is quite probable that we would find) the various data of natural theology:

² Primarily in *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 2004).

the existence of a complex physical universe, the (almost invariable) conformity of material bodies to natural laws, those laws together with the initial state of the universe being such as to lead to the evolution of human organisms; these humans having a mental life (and so souls), having great opportunities for helping or hurting each other, and having experiences in which it seems to them that they are aware of the presence of God. (It would also not be improbable that we would find the kind and quantity of evil, both suffering and sinning, that there is in the world.) So when e reports these data, I have argued, $P(e | t \& k)$ is as probable as not. Yet, unless there is a God, there is little reason to expect such data; that is, it is most improbable that we would find them. Because both $P(t | k)$ and $P(e | \sim t \& k)$ are low, $P(e | k)$ is low. The significant value of $P(e | t \& k)$, and the very low values of $P(t | k)$ and $(e | k)$ overall makes $P(t | e \& k)$ to be as probable as not (viz. $= \frac{1}{2}$). I have given arguments for all this elsewhere.

I stress here and throughout this discussion that it is not possible to give precise numerical values to any of these terms, or to any of the terms involved in the calculation of the probability of any scientific or historical theory. All one can say in these latter cases is that some values are high, others are very low, some are greater than others, etc. Nevertheless, even such rough values enable us to formalize arguments in order to show that some theory has a high or, as the case may be, low probability. And the same goes for the probabilities with which I am concerned in this book. I shall give artificially precise values to these probabilities within the range which my arguments suggest that they have, in order to show (in the way clarified by Bayes's Theorem) the consequences of the probabilities of other propositions for the probability on all our evidence that the Christian Revelation is true.

To repeat, I have argued elsewhere that the probability of theism (t) on the generally accessible evidence of natural theology is of the order of $\frac{1}{2}$. So I shall in future let k be the evidence of natural theology, and assume $P(t | k) = \frac{1}{2}$. Whether or not I have assessed this value correctly, there will be a value for this probability, and what that value is, is crucially relevant to whether the historical evidence considered in this book shows that the Christian Revelation is true.

THE PROBABILITY OF THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION

I argued in Chapters 5 and 6 that if there is a God, there is strong reason to expect a revelation concerned with certain topics (including a claim that God became incarnate), to be authenticated by miracle and developed in a church. Let's capture that, where r is the occurrence of a revelation of the requisite kind authenticated by miracle and developed in a church, as $P(r | t \& k) = \frac{1}{2}$. Assuming $P(t | k) = \frac{1}{2}$, then (since r entails t),

$$P(r | k) = P(r | t \& k)P(t | k) = \frac{1}{4}$$

Part III set out a lot of historical evidence about Jesus and the Church which he founded; and I seek to assess the probability that the Christian Revelation in its developed form is true on the basis of this evidence. In order to feed it into the probability calculus in a useful way, we need to describe that evidence in very general terms, as evidence of a certain very general kind, the kind being picked out by features which make a difference to the probability of some claim about Jesus and his Church. For example, I shall cite evidence relevant to whether Jesus led a perfect life under difficult conditions. And I can represent this by some symbol, say d_6 . But d_6 will not be a conjunction of all the known details of Jesus's life and the particular features of his death. Rather, it will be a description of the extent to which those details entail that the known incidents of the life of Jesus were of the kind to be expected if he led a perfect life under difficult conditions—for example, that he did many apparently good actions, no apparently bad actions, and suffered much.

Clearly, on any hypothesis, the occurrence of evidence of the general character of a life is going to be a lot more probable than the occurrence of evidence of the details of the life which gave it that general character. Indeed, it is a theorem of the probability calculus that if one proposition (a precise one) entails another proposition (an imprecise one), the latter is always more probable than is the former (or, in odd extreme cases, equally probable with the former), on the same evidence. But it does not matter just how precisely we construe the evidence. For while the probability of certain evidence given r will be lower the more precisely (in ways irrelevant to the claim being assessed) the evidence is described, it will be lower in the same proportion given $\sim r$, or given any rival hypothesis. The two diminutions of probability will thus cancel each other out.

For the sake of simplicity of exposition, I shall divide the historical evidence which I shall call d (set out in the general way described above) into only two parts, d_1 and d_2 ($d \equiv d_1 \ \& \ d_2$); and I shall set it out initially as evidence about a prophet J without for the present saying who that prophet was. (In fact, he was of course Jesus.)

d_1 —historical evidence of a kind relevant to there being one and only one prophet J who provided certain teaching (which was a priori not very improbable) about the issues described in Chapter 7, led a perfect life under difficult conditions, and founded a church such that there is today a church which preserves with it connectedness and continuity of organization and doctrine (its doctrines being a priori not very improbable). (By J 'providing' certain teaching, I understand that either J taught himself or showed himself to believe or his immediate followers taught the relevant teaching. d_1 includes the evidence about what that teaching was. It will also include evidence relevant to the claim that no other prophet taught, acted, and suffered, and had his teaching developed in a church in anything like the same way.)

d_2 —historical evidence relevant to whether there was one and only one prophet N whose life was culminated by a super-miracle, and to whether that prophet was identical with J.

$$\text{By Bayes's Theorem } P(r | d \ \& \ k) = \frac{P(d | r \ \& \ k)P(r | k)}{P(d | k)}$$

$P(d | k)$, the probability that d will occur, whether or not r , is the sum of (the probability that d will occur if r , multiplied by the prior probability of r) plus (the probability that d will occur if $\sim r$, multiplied by the prior probability that $\sim r$, which latter equals one minus the prior probability of r). So:

$$P(r | d \ \& \ k) = \frac{P(d | r \ \& \ k)P(r | k)}{P(d | r \ \& \ k)P(r | k) + P(d | \sim r \ \& \ k)(1 - P(r | k))}$$

Dividing through by $P(d | r \ \& \ k)$, and inserting the value of $\frac{1}{4}$ for $P(r | k)$, we get:

$$P(r | d \ \& \ k) = \frac{1}{1 + 3 \frac{P(d | \sim r \ \& \ k)}{P(d | r \ \& \ k)}}$$

So everything depends on the ratio $\frac{P(d | \sim r \ \& \ k)}{P(d | r \ \& \ k)}$. The smaller that value, the higher is the probability of r . Or, more informatively, the greater is $\frac{P(d | r \ \& \ k)}{P(d | \sim r \ \& \ k)}$, the more probable is r .

$$\frac{P(d | r \ \& \ k)}{P(d | \sim r \ \& \ k)} = \frac{P(d_2 | d_1 \ \& \ r \ \& \ k)}{P(d_2 | d_1 \ \& \ \sim r \ \& \ k)} \frac{P(d_1 | r \ \& \ k)}{P(d_1 | \sim r \ \& \ k)}$$

I begin with $P(d_1 | r \ \& \ k)$. How probable is it that there would be a prophet who taught the kind of things that Jesus taught, led a perfect life under difficult conditions, and founded a church, such that a present-day church has with it connectedness and continuity of doctrine (where his teaching and that of the church is plausibly true)? Given r (and k , which we can ignore since it makes no difference to this value, given r), it is fairly probable. I described in Chapter 7 the evidence which was just the kind of evidence you would expect (i.e. it was very probable would occur) if Jesus taught about the relevant issues, and none of his teaching was a priori very improbable (e.g. he did not teach people to rape and pillage), and if he led a perfect life under difficult conditions and founded a church with the stated subsequent history. It is disputed whether the evidence is such as you would expect to find if he taught (even by his actions) that he believed that he was God incarnate and was making atonement for our sins. I argued, however, in Chapter 7 that the evidence was such as was

not too unlikely to occur if he taught these things; and I argued in Chapter 5 that it was not a priori improbable that if there is a God, there would be a prophet of whom these things were true: that is, God would become incarnate, among other reasons, in order to identify with our suffering and to provide atonement for our sins. I argued in Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 that there is today a church which preserves connectedness and continuity of organization and doctrine with the Church which Jesus founded, even if it is currently split by schism. Some scholars have cast considerable doubt on whether the developed doctrine of the Trinity is derivable from the teaching of Jesus; and so consider that in this respect there is a lack of connectedness and continuity of doctrine with the apostolic church; I argued against that. I have argued elsewhere³ for the doctrines of the Nicene Creed being not a priori very improbable; and I argued in Chapters 10 and 11 for the church's doctrine about the Bible and for its moral teaching not being a priori very improbable. I argued in Chapter 6 for Jesus being the only serious candidate for satisfying these requirements. So if r were true, if there has been a revelation of the requisite kind, how probable is it that we would have evidence about one and only one prophet of the kind which we have about Jesus? Some of it, I have suggested, is exactly what we would expect; other of it is possibly not exactly as we would expect. Any figure is absurdly arbitrary. But I suggest that $\frac{1}{4}$ would capture the combination of very strong and rather less strong evidence. So let's say $P(d_1 | r \& k) = \frac{1}{4}$.

What next about $P(d_1 | \sim r \& k)$? How probable is it that we would get the combination of evidence represented by d_1 if there has been no revelation (and given k , which again we can ignore since it makes no difference to the value)? The human race certainly produces prophets who live good lives and teach about the relevant issues. But I have argued that there is no other prophet about whom there is the sort of evidence that there is about Jesus that he both lived a perfect life under difficult conditions *and* claimed to be God Incarnate making atonement for our sins. So this is a rare event for the human race. And for it to be combined with evidence of a church with the features described is therefore an unlikely event in human history. Again, numbers are arbitrary. But let's say $P(d_1 | \sim r \& k) = \frac{1}{20}$.

Is the historical evidence such as we might expect if there is a God who has put his signature on the life and teaching of the same prophet by a super-miracle? If the Resurrection occurred in the way described in the Gospels, it would be such a super-miracle. There is I claimed in Chapter 7 substantial (but by no means overwhelming) witness testimony to its occurrence, of a kind to be

³ For the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation see my book *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), chs. 8, 9, and 10; and for the doctrine of the Atonement see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. ch. 10, and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, ch. 2.

expected if there was a revelation of the requisite kind through Jesus and given the d_1 evidence. So let's say $P(d_2 | d_1 \& r \& k) = \frac{1}{2}$. $P(d_2 | d_1 \& \sim r \& k)$ is the probability that evidence of the d_1 kind would be combined with evidence of the d_2 kind in the same prophet, without God having provided a revelation of the requisite kind (given k , which again we can ignore). There is no other prophet in human history about whom there is the kind of evidence that there is about Jesus, to the effect that his life was culminated by a super-miracle. Hence, unless it was planned by God (and God would not have allowed any other being to arrange this, unless what it indicated was true), it is vastly improbable that there would be both kinds of evidence concerning the same prophet: that the prophet about whom there is good evidence that he lived and taught in the requisite way and whose teaching was continued in the requisite way was also the prophet about whom there is good evidence that his life was culminated by a super-miracle. And God would not have arranged this coincidence unless what it indicated was true; for that would be to practise a vast deception on the human race. I suggest that we measure the vast improbability of $P(d_2 | d_1 \& \sim r \& k)$ by $\frac{1}{50}$.
Then:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{P(d | r \& k)}{P(d | \sim r \& k)} &= \frac{P(d_2 | d_1 \& r \& k)}{P(d_2 | d_1 \& \sim r \& k)} \times \frac{P(d_1 | r \& k)}{P(d_1 | \sim r \& k)} \\ &= \frac{\frac{1}{2}}{\frac{1}{50}} \times \frac{\frac{1}{4}}{\frac{1}{20}} = 125 \end{aligned}$$

So

$$P(r | d \& k) = \frac{1}{1 + \frac{3}{125}} = \frac{125}{128} = 0.9766$$

This is the probability on both the evidence of natural theology and the historical evidence about Jesus and his Church, that there has been or will be a revelation. We can now add to our evidence that the prophet whom the evidence concerns is Jesus. That can make no difference to the probability of r given $(d \& k)$, since we have already taken into account in d all our relevant evidence about Jesus; all that I am adding to the evidence is his bare identity, his name.

If there was a revelation of the requisite kind, either it occurred through Jesus or through some other prophet. Let j be the proposition that the revelation occurred through Jesus (i.e. that the Christian Revelation is true) and $\sim j$ the proposition that the revelation has occurred or will occur through some other prophet. Then: $P(r | d \& k) = P(j | d \& k) + P(\sim j | d \& k)$. Given d amplified by adding to it the prophet's name, Jesus, there is very strong evidence that the requisite revelation has not occurred so far through any other prophet. There is the theoretical possibility that there has been no revelation of the requisite kind

so far, but it is yet to come. But the new revelation would have to concern a Jesus-like prophet; and unless the evidence connected with the new prophet was overwhelmingly strong (which would remove from us any significant freedom of choice as to how to respond to it), there would always be serious doubt as to which was the true revelation. By allowing evidence of moderate strength favouring the occurrence of a true revelation through Jesus, God would have allowed us to be deceived in a way which would prevent us from ever obtaining a reasonably justified belief about revelation. And that would defeat the point of revelation. So I suggest that the probability that the revelation has occurred through a prophet other than Jesus is very low indeed. So—to get a neat answer—let's say $P(\sim j | d \ \& \ k) = 0.0066$. Hence $P(j | d \ \& \ k) = 0.97$. The historical evidence gives a 0.97 probability to the (core of) the teaching of Jesus developed by the Church being a true revelation from God.

Readers who have read the Appendix to my book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* will recall that I reached this same figure (0.97) for the probability on historical evidence that Jesus was God Incarnate (and also for the probability that Jesus rose from the dead), as I have reached now for the probability that the Christian Revelation is true. These figures are bound to be roughly the same, because if God became incarnate to identify with our suffering, to atone for our sins, and to reveal truth to us (and it is because of the need for these things that we have prior reason to suppose that he would become incarnate), he would have ensured that those truths continued to be available to us. Hence part of the evidence for Jesus being God Incarnate is that his teaching was continued in a church and was not very improbable a priori (and for both claims there is the evidence of the witness testimony to the Resurrection). Conversely, since the major part of the Church's teaching is that Jesus was God Incarnate, who identified with our suffering, atoned for our sins, and revealed truths, it couldn't be true unless Jesus was God incarnate who identified with our suffering and revealed truths to us (and again for both claims there is the evidence of the witness testimony to the Resurrection). So the probabilities of Jesus being God Incarnate and of the Christian Revelation being true are not going to differ significantly. And for similar reasons, these probabilities are not going to differ much from the probability that Jesus rose from the dead. But I repeat, and need to repeat very often, that by the use of numbers I am giving artificially precise values to such expressions as 'very probable' and 'more probable than not' simply in order to bring out the force of my arguments. That, for example, is why I gave the highly arbitrary value of 0.0066 to $P(\sim j | d \ \& \ k)$, to capture the very small probability of there being a revelation of the requisite kind but not through Jesus. My real conclusion is that j is very probably true, and so are the conclusions for which I argued in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* that Jesus was God Incarnate and that he rose from the dead. The difference between the two books is that they have considered different parts of the evidence at length, while running very briefly over the other parts.

PLANTINGA ON 'DWINDLING PROBABILITIES'

The argument of the first edition of this book was subject to a much publicized criticism by Alvin Plantinga,⁴ known as 'the objection from dwindling probabilities.'⁵ (In stating this argument, I use Plantinga's notation, which is—in ways which do not affect the issues—somewhat different from that used so far in this Appendix.) In order to give a probabilistic argument for the truths of the Christian Revelation, which Plantinga calls 'the great truths of the Gospel' (G), Plantinga claims correctly, we need to argue for the existence of God (T) on the basis of background knowledge (K). But he summarizes this background knowledge as 'the totality of what we know apart from theism'. He writes that I have claimed elsewhere that that value is greater than 0.5. Then, as Plantinga represents my style of argument, we must consider the probability, given (T & K), that (A) 'God would make some kind of revelation ... to humankind'— $P(A | T \& K)$. But we then need to argue that 'such a revelation would contain G'; and Plantinga suggests that one way to do this is to ask for the probability of (B), 'Jesus's teachings were such that they could be sensibly interpreted and extrapolated to G', given (K & T & A)—that is, $P(B | K \& T \& A)$. But why suppose that the teachings are true? Perhaps K plus what has been established so far makes it probable that (C) 'Jesus rose from the dead'—that is, $P(C | K \& T \& A \& B)$ is high. And maybe it is probable, given all that, that (D) 'In raising Jesus from the dead, God endorsed his teachings'— $P(D | K \& T \& A \& B \& C)$ is high. But was he endorsing the extrapolation of those teachings to G? Perhaps it is probable that (E), 'Jesus founded a church to interpret his teaching, and that that church which is still extant teaches G, and God preserves it from error.' So call the probability that God endorsed the extrapolation of Jesus's teachings in this way, given the previous evidence, $P(E | K \& T \& A \& B \& C \& D)$. But to get the probability that G is true by this route on the only evidence we have (K), it is necessary to multiply these probabilities together: $P(E | K) = P(T | K) \times P(A | T \& K) \times P(B | T \& K \& A) \times P(C | K \& T \& A \& B) \times P(D | K \& T \& A \& B \& C) \times P(E | K \& T \& A \& B \& C \& D)$. Since E entails G, the probability of G, $P(G | K)$ can be taken as tantamount to $P(E | K)$. Then, Plantinga points out, at each stage of multiplication, there will be a diminution of probability. Each individual probability may be quite high; and Plantinga suggests for these probabilities values which he regards as 'generous,' around 0.8 or 0.9. If we multiply together the particular values suggested by Plantinga for these individual probabilities, we get a value for the resulting probability of 0.35. So the attempt to establish

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 272–80.

⁵ My argument in this section is a shortened version of pp. 538–42 of my 'Natural Theology, "Dwindling Probabilities" and "Lack of Rapport"', *Faith and Philosophy*, 21 (2004), 533–46.

G by historical argument cannot give it a very high probability, not at all the kind of probability we need if we are 'to know the great truths of the gospel'.⁶

Now, strictly speaking—as Plantinga acknowledges, but takes no further— $P(G|K)$ is the sum of the probabilities of the different routes to it. G might be true without some of these intermediate propositions being true. For any h, e , and k , $P(h|k) = P(h|e \ \& \ k) P(e|k) + P(h|\sim e \ \& \ k) P(\sim e|k)$. $P(h|e \ \& \ k)$ may be much larger than $P(h|\sim e \ \& \ k)$, and $P(e|k)$ may be larger than $P(\sim e|k)$, and so to simplify my argument from k to h , I may say ' k , therefore probably e , e therefore probably h '; and the probability accruing to h by this route will be $P(h|e \ \& \ k) P(e|k)$. But to get an accurate value for $P(h|k)$, the other probabilities must be added in; there is some low probability that, given k , e may be false; and some low probability that even if e is false, h is still true. Hence Plantinga rightly says that $P(G|K)$ is 'equal to or greater than' the value obtained by multiplying the probabilities along the main line of argument which he discusses. And if the probabilities along the other routes from K to G are significant, they could make a significant difference to the overall probability. But because G already includes most of the propositions along the main line of argument (A , B , and so on), G will not be true unless almost all of those other propositions are true; and so we can ignore this formal point.

Plantinga, however, misrepresents the structure of the argument of the first edition of this book. He supposes that all the evidence there is, is put on the table at the beginning. K is supposed to be all evidence relevant not merely to T , but to C and D and so on. By—reasonably—considering only the main line of argument, in effect he treats G as a conjunction of all the propositions along that line of argument as well as a further proposition (the proposition that if all the other propositions are true, G is true). The diminution is then inevitable in virtue of a theorem of the calculus that the probability of a conjunction of many conjuncts on some evidence is never greater than (and, normally less than) the probability of only some of those conjuncts on the same evidence. But the force of evidence may often be better appreciated if we do not put all our evidence on the table at the beginning; and instead, as we add each conjunct to the hypothesis, we also add a new piece of evidence. In this way the probability may increase, not decrease. $P(p \ \& \ q | r \ \& \ s)$ may be greater or less than $P(p | r)$; it all depends what are the conjuncts of the hypothesis and of the evidence. In the first edition of this book (as in the present edition), I did pursue the policy of feeding in the evidence gradually. The ' K ' in my claim that $P(T|K)$ was of the order⁷ of $\frac{1}{2}$ was not all the evidence there is, but the 'other

⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 280.

⁷ I had claimed in the first edition of *The Existence of God* (1979) that $P(T|K)$ was 'greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ ', because I had supposed in that edition that there was a small amount of historical evidence connected with the Resurrection relevant to T . I arbitrarily supposed

evidence'⁸ adduced in my book *The Existence of God*, basically the evidence of natural theology—that there is a universe, that it is governed by simple laws of nature, etc. Then, at each stage of the argument, I added further evidence (as I have done in the present edition). Thus I claimed that historical evidence made it fairly probable in outline what Jesus taught,⁹ that he founded a church,¹⁰ and that he announced that his life and death constituted an atonement for our sin,¹¹ and so on. At each stage of the argument (as in the present edition) new historical evidence was introduced. If the hypothesis remains the same (r , to revert to the notation of the present edition, throughout most of the argument of this Appendix), and the evidence added at each stage is such that it is more probable that it will occur if the hypothesis is true than if it is false, then the probability of the hypothesis will increase at each stage. In this Appendix I represented the historical evidence as a conjunction of only two conjuncts (d_1 and d_2), and it will be apparent from the calculations given earlier that the probability of r increases as we add d_2 to d_1 . It should also be clear that if I had divided the evidence more finely into more conjuncts, the probability would still in general increase as we add more and more evidence.

Probabilities will always 'dwindle' in any historical argument for a lengthy conjunction if the argument is formalized in the way in which Plantinga formalized my argument. But if the argument can be formalized in the way which I adopted, and the probabilities do then in fact increase at each stage, it follows that if instead we do formalize the argument in Plantinga's way, the 'dwindling' will be extremely small—for example, from 0.98 to 0.97!

If Plantinga's argument had had the kind of effect which he suggested, it could have been used to show that any serious piece of secular history was very improbable; for his argument did not rely in any way on the theological character of the historical propositions. Consider a single page of a serious work of secular history, about the life of Julius Caesar for example, containing many propositions, for which the same evidence is adduced. The first proposition will be more probable than the conjunction of the first and the second, and that will be more probable than the conjunction of the first, second, and third, and so on. The probability that every proposition on the page is true will certainly be less on the same evidence than the probability that the first one is true. But whether the difference is significant or not depends on what the evidence is, what the historical propositions are, and how well they fit together. No worthwhile general point can be made.

it to be small, allowing that later work might show—as I believe that it has shown—that this evidence might significantly increase the probability of T. Without taking account of any such evidence, and also for a reason arising from the problem of evil (see my *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 30 n.12), I consider that it is more reasonable to suppose $P(T|K) = \frac{1}{2}$.

⁸ *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 1st edn. (Clarendon Press, 1992), 69.

⁹ Ibid. 106.

¹⁰ Ibid. 107.

¹¹ Ibid. 109.

Additional Notes

A. STATEMENTS, PROPOSITIONS, AND THOUGHTS (SEE CH. 1 N. 2)

I derive my terminology of statement and proposition from Lemmon. See E. J. Lemmon, 'Sentences, Statements and Propositions', in Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (eds.), *British Analytical Philosophy* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). My definitions, however, differ from his in the respect that his criterion of property identity is that of coextensionality, not synonymy of predicates which rigidly designate the properties. My 'statement' is Russell's 'proposition'. The Fregean concept of a 'thought' seems to be such that the same thought is expressed if and only if both the same statement and the same proposition are expressed; however, for Frege moments of time have to be picked out non-indexically if a definite thought is to be expressed, and thus Fregean thoughts have a timeless truth-value. (See G. Frege, 'Thoughts', in G. Frege, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, trans. P. Geach and R. H. Stoothoff (Basil Blackwell, 1984). Note: "The words "this tree is covered with green leaves" are not sufficient by themselves to constitute the expression of thought, for the time of utterance is involved as well. Without the time specification thus given we have not a complete thought, that is we have no thought at all' (p. 370).) For a brief account of Frege's concept, see C. Peacocke, *Thoughts: An Essay on Content* (Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1–2. My 'proposition' is Perry's 'relativized proposition' (John Perry, 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical', *Nous*, 13 (1979), 3–21, esp. 12–15). It has some similarity to Kaplan's 'character', with, if I understand Kaplan correctly, the crucial difference that a 'character' does not have a truth-value; it is, rather, what (together with context) gives truth-value to a sentence (David Kaplan, 'On the Logic of Demonstratives', in P. A. French *et al.* (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (University of Minnesota Press, 1979)).

B. REFERRING EXPRESSIONS (SEE CH. 2 N. 3)

The view that we may refer to an individual by means of a description which (to speak strictly) does not apply to him is associated with Keith Donnellan. (See his 'Reference and Definite Descriptions', *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966), 281–304; and 'Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora', in French *et al.* (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*.) However, what Donnellan actually claims is that, so long as by the description 'the man drinking Martini' I was intending my hearers to pick out a certain man, then

the man to whom I refer is the man to whom I am intending to refer; my intention suffices, whatever the indications or lack of them provided by the context, to secure reference. At least this is so, claims Donnellan, of definite descriptions used referentially. Donnellan distinguishes the attributive from the referring use of definite descriptions. 'The *A*' used attributively in 'The *A* is *B*' says merely, 'Whoever is the *A* is *B*'. 'The *A*' used referentially, by contrast, is a device for picking out an object which could be picked out in other ways; the fact that the description 'the *A*' applies to it is not of importance for what is being said. Donnellan's cited claim concerns only definite descriptions used referentially. However, it must only hold when the context makes clear to whom the speaker was intending to refer; for meaning is a public matter, and a mere intention to refer to some individual cannot ensure that the speaker does so refer. If Donnellan were right, one could never say in such cases, 'Even if what you meant to say was true, what you actually said was false'; and that surely is a comment which must always have application to all public assertions. Unless the context does make clear that the intended reference (speaker's reference) is other than the object picked out by the description (semantic reference), then the reference is the semantic reference. This account must be extended to proper names, as when I say, 'John looks tired', but the context reveals that I mean that George looks tired (as Kripke pointed out—see S. A. Kripke, 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference', in French *et al.* (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*). For full-length discussion of the criteria for determining to which (if any) object a referring expression refers, see Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Clarendon Press, 1982), esp. ch. 9.

C. THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA (SEE CH. 5 N. 9)

Aquinas held that 'the first principles of natural law are altogether unalterable' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 94. 5). He does not tell us much in the *Summa Theologiae* about which these are, but he does write that they are principles too general to be mentioned in the Ten Commandments, principles such as that no one ought to do evil to anyone, which he says are 'inscribed in natural reason as self-evident' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2ae. 100.3). Duns Scotus tells us that the only moral obligations from which God could not dispense us are the duties to love and reverence God himself; which he sees as constituted by the first three of the Ten Commandments. See his *Ordinatio III*, suppl. dist. 37, text and translation on pp. 268–87 and commentary on pp. 60–4 of Allan B. Wolter (ed.), *Duns Scotus on Will and Morality* (Catholic University of America Press, 1986). In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro* (9e), Socrates asked the famous question: 'Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?' Put in theistic terms (and phrased simply in terms of command and obligation), the Euthyphro dilemma becomes: Does God command what is obligatory for other reasons, or is what is obligatory

obligatory because God commands it? Kant gave the simple answer of taking the first horn (i.e., accepting the former view); others have given the simple answer of taking the second horn. But, like Aquinas and Scotus, I am suggesting that we take the first horn for some obligations, and the second horn for other obligations (and similarly for claims about the goodness or badness of actions).

D. 'CONNECTEDNESS', 'CONTINUITY', AND 'BEST CANDIDATE' (SEE CH. 8 N. 2)

I derive my concepts of 'connectedness' and 'continuity' from Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Clarendon Press, 1984), 206. Parfit analyses the identity of a person P_2 at a time t_2 with a person P_1 at time t_1 (or—to put his claim more precisely—the extent to which P_1 'survives' as P_2) as consisting in the extent of their psychological connectedness and continuity, brought about by an underlying cause. For Parfit, connectedness is similarity in crucial respects, while continuity is the 'holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness'. Thus two persons are psychologically connected to the extent to which they have similar (apparent) memories and character. They are psychologically continuous to the extent to which there are between them overlapping chains of (qualitatively) similar memories and character. While I think that Parfit's account of personal identity is mistaken, I find his concepts of 'connectedness' and 'continuity' useful for analysing the identity of societies, artefacts, and non-conscious living things (e.g. plants). I have amended it, however, for the purposes of this book in requiring for continuity not merely 'the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness', but also the existence of connectedness at each time in the interval between the earlier and later times. This amendment will enable us, I suggest, better to capture our intuitions about when a later society is the same as an earlier society; and it might also be welcome to Parfit as an additional requirement on his own account of personal identity.

The concept, which I use at the end of the first main section of ch. 8 of the 'best candidate' for being the original thing is similar to Nozick's concept of the 'closest continuer' of the original thing. See R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Clarendon Press, 1981), ch. 1. Nozick's analysis of identity over time in terms of closest continuers (if spelled out in terms of the extent of connectedness and continuity) seems to me highly plausible for the cases of societies, artefacts, and plants, which he mentions; but (as with Parfit) not for the case to which he wishes mainly to apply it—persons.

E. HERMENEUTICS IN RECENT THEOLOGY (SEE CH. 10 N. 87)

A number of recent theologians have claimed that the sense of a biblical text is contained solely in the text itself, and is independent of the author's intention

in authorizing it. There are certainly many different ways in which we can treat a text; but the normal way of treating a text is to consider what it means as a text authorized by a certain author in a certain context, and what that meaning is will depend on who is authorizing the text. However, the only reason for treating a biblical text as a document having authority can be that it was authorized by God. In ch. 8 and 13 of his *Divine Discourse*, Nicholas Wolterstorff has provided detailed criticism of the 'meaning lies solely within the text' views of Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei.

Another writer who has advocated such a view is Brevard Childs. He has, in my view rightly, championed the idea of 'canonical criticism' that sentences of the Bible derive their meaning from their literary context in the whole book. By 'the whole book' he means, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (SCM Press, 1979), the whole Old Testament; but he allows that 'the theological norms of Christian theology can only emerge from the context of Christian scripture, that is Old and New Testaments taken together' (*Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SCM Press, 1967), 127). He seems to be saying that the two contexts (Old Testament alone, or Old and New Testaments together) yield different meanings for Old Testament texts, and that we may choose either context with equal rationality. And whatever its literary context, 'canonical criticism' does not look beyond the text—it is a false move to attempt to correlate the text with some historical event' (ibid. 26). So 'Childs never tells us exactly *how* theological truths and values can be recovered from ancient texts' (Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 1991)).

Karl Barth claims, correctly in my view, that the Bible is not the Christian Revelation, but is the unique witness thereto. However, he goes on to claim that it does not provide a series of infallible propositions, but rather a matrix to which the preacher responds in preaching the Gospel. The men in it whom 'we hear as witnesses speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves' (*Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance (T. & T. Clark, 1956), i. 2. 507). If the prophets and the apostles are to act as signs of the eternal word, 'there is a constant need of that continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church' (ibid. 513). Dogmatics begins with the hearing of the word of God 'in the proclamation of the Church' (ibid. 775). Dogmatics will find itself 'in conversation not only with the Church of its own generation, but also with that of all previous "presents" which have now become "past"'. Dogmatics can be properly understood only when viewed as part of a single movement, of which it forms the most recent stage' (ibid. 779). If all this means that the Bible must be interpreted (even if not infallibly) in the light of the record of Church doctrine, then the argument of this book supports him, with qualifications on the extent of the fallibility of the biblical writers and their interpreters. But Barth then needs to explain why Christian doctrine should be trusted, and why the Bible has a role in its exposition. He does not seem to carry through

this programme at which he hints, thoroughly. Asked, 'What gives the present canon of Scripture its authority?', he replied, 'The canon is the canon just because it is so' (quoted from his 'Table Talk', in J. Bowden, *Karl Barth* (SCM Press, 1971), 113–14).

For descriptions of different contemporary methods of interpreting the Old Testament, see J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), and D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (SCM Press, 1975). Barton defends explicitly the thesis that there is no privileged method of interpretation.

F. CAUSES AND CURE OF HOMOSEXUALITY (SEE CH. 11 N. 22)

In an article surveying recent research, 'Sexuality: Orientation and Identity', in the *Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences*, 3rd edn., iv (John Wiley and Sons, 2001), M. Diamond writes that 'the scientific community worldwide' holds it to be generally the case that there is an interaction between genetic and environmental factors in the causation of homosexuality. The influence of genetic factors was brought out, e.g., in two studies on identical twins by J. M. Bailey and R. C. Pillard: 'A Genetic Study of Male Sexual Orientation', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 48 (1991), 1089–96, and 'Heritable Factors Influence Sexual Orientation in Women', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50 (1993), 217–23. In the first study they found that 52 per cent of identical male twins who were homosexuals had homosexual twin brothers, whereas only 22 per cent of fraternal male homosexual twins had homosexual twin brothers, and 11 per cent of unrelated adopted males had adopted male homosexual brothers. The 48 per cent identical twins not having homosexual brothers can only be accounted for by the influence of environmental factors. And anyway the 52 per cent result may in part be caused by the same causes as produce the 11 per cent result for unrelated adopted males, presumably a similar environment in some respect; and even the remaining genetic influence may not be the result of the operation of homosexual genetic factors as such, but may be partially or wholly the result of genes influencing the development of particular personality traits which 'influence the manner in which an individual and his or her environment interact as sexual orientation and other personality characteristics unfold developmentally' (W. Byne and B. Parsons, 'Human Sexual Orientation', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50 (1993), 228–37).

Environmental influences may be divided into direct social influences, indirect social influences, and biological influences. By direct social influences I mean solicitation and the acceptability in the society of homosexual practices. By indirect social influences I mean features of personal interactions which have a less obvious connection with the development of homosexuality. I mentioned in

the text the Freudian-type factors and the absence of gender-specific education and dress. There is evidence too that the youngest of many boys are more prone to homosexual orientation than others. (See W. H. James, 'Biological and Psychological Determination of Male and Female Sexual Orientation', *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 37 (2005), 55–67.) I would hazard a guess that this arises because of the way in which youngest boys are occasionally treated by the rest of the family. There is also evidence that child abuse encourages male homosexuality. There are of course abundant other reasons for trying to prevent child abuse and 'cold' fathers, as well as to prevent homosexuality. There is also strong evidence that direct and indirect social influences (e.g. the acceptability of lesbianism and the absence of male company) play a significant role in the development of female homosexuality (*ibid.*). In a recent article favourable to gay and lesbian parents (J. Stacey and T. J. Biblarz, '(How) does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?', *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001), 159–83, the authors acknowledge that those brought up by homosexual parents are somewhat more likely to be homosexual themselves: 'even if heterosexism were to disappear ... parental sexual orientation would probable continue to have some impact on the eventual sexuality of their children.' (178) Biological influences could include diet and air pollution, but there is not the slightest evidence that such factors play any role at all in the development of sexual orientation.

A full recent study of 200 self-selected individuals who reported that their orientation had been changed as a result of therapy ('reparative therapy'), and that the change had lasted at least five years, concluded that their self-reports were in general credible (Robert L. Spitzer, 'Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change their Sexual Orientation?', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 32 (2003), 403–17). The majority of participants gave reports of change from a predominantly or exclusively homosexual orientation before therapy to a predominantly or exclusively heterosexual orientation in the past year. Reports of complete change were, however, uncommon. The author of the report was 'initially sceptical' (*ibid.* 412), but 'became convinced of the possibility of change in some gay men and lesbians'.

All of this is very far from an exhaustive full explanation of the causes and possibilities for cure of homosexuality. But it does support the view of the chapter that there are significant social influences among the causes of homosexuality, and gives no reason to doubt that these include direct social influences. It also supports the view that there is some prospect of therapeutic cure for those who seek it. As with the cure of any other disability or disease, we should be able to do better in this century than in the last century.

There is also recent scientific evidence supporting the view advocated in the chapter that a child needs to have a biological father and a mother involved in their upbringing. An article in *The New Scientist* (Mairi Macleod, 'Her Father's Daughter', 10th Feb. 2007, pp. 38–41) summarizes recent results

showing that without the presence of their biological father girls mature early, that maturing early 'can have serious health repercussions', and that the good influence of the father is stronger if the parents' marriage is a good one. On the need for a mother, Stacey and Biblarz (op. cit. 175) acknowledge that 'On average mothers tend to be more invested in and skilled at childcare than fathers, and ... mothers are more apt than fathers to engage in the kinds of childcare activities that appear to be particularly crucial to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.'

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